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September 18, 1894.

No. 895.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 cents.

Vol. XXXV.



"YOU SAY I CAN'T PRODUCE THE BOY!" HE CRIED. "LOOK FOR YOURSELF; THE BOY IS HERE! LOOK AND TREMBLE!"

Fifth Avenue Fred, THE VALET DETECTIVE;

OR,

A CORNER IN ROGUES.

BY JO PIERCE.

AUTHOR OF "MESSENGER 999," "CITIZEN RUBE," "KIT CLIPPER," "GOOD-FOR-NOTHING JERRY," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE TRAIL OF A SECRET.

A BOY sat on one of the benches in Central Park, idly watching the people that came and went along the neighboring paths—people of all grades of society, rich and poor, contented and wretched.

His own expression was satisfied, and yet thoughts of a serious nature found place in his mind as he noticed the more forlorn of the wanderers.

"Hard luck has got them in his grasp," he meditated, "and I know how to feel for them. I've never had enough cash in my pocket to make me a spendthrift, and, now that events are running in another channel with me, I don't forget the time when I had to hustle for my keep, and never knew but I would wind up as a ragged and dirty tramp. I never intended to, that's sure, but I don't believe all these vagabonds fell from grace just because they were lazy."

At this point he caught sight of a man whose personal appearance would have invited and held attention at any time, but who was now doubly of interest to the boy because he was sharply regarding the latter.

"A queer-looking chap; but, why does he stare at me so? I never saw him before—if I had, I should remember him; that's my way."

The man had a face not easily forgotten. He was of middle age and ordinary size, and out of the usual run only as to his face. This was noticeably lacking in color, a defect made all the more conspicuous by black hair and a black beard.

His deep-set eyes were bright and black, and overhung with shaggy brows, while his general expression was so hawk-like that the boy could but look at him in curiosity and interest.

This person, on seeing he was discovered, advanced and sat down on the same bench with its first occupant.

"Fine day," he observed.

"Yes. I should remark it was."

"Your afternoon out, I take it."

"Why do you think that?"

"Oh, I know you; your name is Fred Ellis, and you work for old Rosecastle."

"No, I don't, Mister Inquisitor—if that's your name."

"Same thing; you work for his son, being one of those absurdities, an American valet. Yes, you are Bonnel Rosecastle's son's valet! I know the family, you see."

Fred glanced scrutinizingly at the stranger's garments, noting that they were worn and shiny at elbows and knees, but the seedy man continued, calmly indifferent to the boy's evident contempt:

"Like your job?"

"Of course I do, or I wouldn't stay."

"Fine folks!"

Thus far the stranger had not been wasting any words, but he now "pulled himself together," as Fred expressed it, and continued:

"Let me see: I believe old Rosecastle's family consists only of himself and two children, a son and a daughter?"

"That's straight enough for an interviewer."

"Their names are Percy and Maud?"

"Correct again."

"They are getting to be about old enough to marry, but I see no sign of their doing so. Any beaux seeking Maud's society, eh?"

"I've never asked her, nor is it any of my business, any more than it is yours."

"You have eyes; can't you observe?"

"Chance has thrown me into high society," returned Fred, with a touch of humor, "but I never steal a horse when the owner gives me a bridle; I keep in my place, and am properly discreet. If it will be of any real good to you, I'll say that I've never seen any beaux around Miss Rosecastle, nor have I heard of any. Further than that I don't know, and, to be frank, I shouldn't tell you if I did know; I don't go spreading secrets on the house-tops, nor in Central Park to every seedy seat-sticker."

The stranger took the rebuff very philosophically, but did not seem to be discouraged. He asked more questions, all in a mild and insinuating way, and with an outward show of carelessness not in keeping with his persistence.

"I suppose, being rich, they are exclusive?" he questioned.

"Exclusive? Yes, as they have a right to be if it pleases them."

"Hard to get access to them?"

"Not for me," Fred returned, with another wave of humor. "Ever since I became Percy's valet I have been on familiar footing with him. I tread the same carpet and brush the clothes he wears. Some folks in America turn up their noses at valets, but I tell you they fill a long-felt want. True, Bonnel Rosecastle never speaks to me or looks at me, but I'm not his valet, so what he don't say don't concern me."

"He is a Murray Hill aristocrat, and too good to look at common folks," observed the stranger, an unpleasant expression on his white face. "Now, I suppose a seedy-looking man would find it hard to gain an interview with him. Eh?"

"He would, that—as hard as for a bum to get tick at Delmonico's."

"Suppose he persisted, and got inside the mansion?"

"Then a servant would slide him out on his ear."

"Is old Rosecastle a man of nerve?"

"Don't know as to nerve. He has muscle enough to tweak the nose of the man who insults him. I hope you are not thinking of trying to bluff him?"

"Certainly not."

"Because, if you are, he is liable to chew you up. Whatever may be the caliber of Rosecastle, junior, the senior gentleman of that name is a corker, if I may bluntly express myself. My advice is, let him severely alone, or you will come to grief."

Saying this, Fred rose abruptly and walked away. He had spoken without any especial interest in his own words, and never expected to see or hear of the man again, but he would have been surprised had he overheard what followed.

The stranger looked after him with a singular gleam in his hawk-like eyes.

"So you don't aspire to be acquainted with John Brandt?" he muttered. "Well, well, it wouldn't do you any good if you were, for John never plays a nine-spot when he has an ace. Go on, youngster, but be sure and brush off Percy Rosecastle's coat well; that's your best hold in life. He's a valet, while I—ah, well, Bonnel shall make me rich!"

The speaker smiled, but not in an agreeable way. His face was not that of a villain, but there was much in it that told of selfishness, and of a capability for unscrupulous scheming.

"How fine the sunshine is!" he added. "I'll get well warmed up, for there's stirring work ahead. I'll soon make the dry bones rattle, or my name ain't John Brandt."

In the meanwhile, Fred Ellis was making his way out of the Park, and to the eastward, at a rapid pace. That afternoon he had to himself, as G. Percy Rosecastle, his aristocratic employer, was himself occupied, and the lad intended to improve the chance to see one of his friends.

Before entering upon his duties as valet, a week before, Fred had resided on an humble street, down-town, and among humble people. These friends he still valued highly, if he was now wearing good clothes for the first time, and one of them, in particular, he liked so well that long separation was not to his liking or purpose.

The Elevated Road soon took him southward, and after alighting he was hurrying along when a sharp, boyish voice caused him to halt.

"Hullo, Fifth Avenue!"

Fred turned; before him was a boy three years younger than himself, and evidently not much over thirteen. He was a bright, shrewd-looking lad, and the stamp of honesty was as apparent on his face as that of poverty was on his coarse, worn clothes.

"Hullo, Tip!" cried the other; "you're just the kid I was looking for."

"Want ter swap jobs?"

"Not I."

"I could make G. Percy Rosecastle howl with joy, an' create a wish fer another like me in the bosom o' his dude chum—wot's his name?"

"Montmorency Lestrangle."

"Jes' so. The two What-is-its o' Murray Hill. You'll get ter be a What-is-it, too, I'm afeerd."

"Don't make fun of your betters—meaning myself."

"You! Great guns! why, I expect ter see you blossom out in a cane an' eye-glass, yit!"

"Young man, you don't fully understand!" Fred declared. "I've now been among the Four Hundred so long—it's a week, you know—that I am beginning to feel like one of them. My blood is actually turning blue!"

"You've go' 'em bad! Do they crawl?"

"None of us crawl, on Murray Hill," was Fred's lofty reply. "We are the select, the elect, the *crème*! We see with our ears and breathe through our eyes, so as not to be like common folks. But, great Scott! you just ought to see the gang I'm shipwrecked among!"

The speaker dropped his dignified air and laughed until his companion caught the complaint.

"Lots of fun, ain't there?" Tip asked.

"Bushels! But you bet I keep my end up! I reel off words as long as your arm, though I'm not always sure I get the right ones. I'm pretty near turned to a statue, trying to be solemn and rigid."

"Hope you don't act as bad as a coachman."

"Tip, if I ever get to be like those living corpses I hope you will shake me. Many a time you and I have been on Fifth Avenue and seen the popularity roll by in their grand carriages, and I've looked at one of the drivers and said to you: 'What is it? Does it breathe? Is it alive? Has it a backbone? Can it move its eyes? Has it a crick in the neck? Where, oh! where is Barnum?' Tip, do you imagine I could freeze into a petrified camel like a coachman?"

"Dunno what ter think!" Tip confessed.

"When a feller falls as low as you—"

"But you don't know the fun I have!"

Fred paused, chuckled, and added:

"I'm working Murray Hill for all it's worth. I'm getting a good salary without doing any great amount of work, and though G. Percy Rosecastle thinks I am only the dust under his feet, he never misuses me. This valet scheme is a great one, and it's enough to give a chap fits to be in the swim. There are funny folks in this world, Tip. You ought to be one of us."

"Nixey!" was the emphatic reply. "I wa'n't never cut out for sech a job. You kin be Fifth Avenue Fred; I'll be somethin' else. Fack is, I want ter be a detective!"

"Tip Higgins, are you crazy?"

"Not so crazy as valets, an' sech. You see, I got on to a bit of a racket last night. I was over in Fourteenth street, an' stopped for a bit by the Academy of Music, under the awning. There was plenty of folks goin' an' comin' through Fourteenth street, but, of course, all was pretty quiet on Irving Place."

"Pretty soon two men showed up right around on the Irving side corner, while I was on the other side. Where they came from I don't know; first I seen of 'em they was there. They begun to talk."

"How's business?" says one, who was a little feller.

"Quiet," says t'other.

"No new hauls?"

"Nothin' worth havin'."

"I shall be around soon, and I want you to pay cash on some diamonds."

"I'll try," says the biggest man. "Where did yer get the sparklers?"

"Right off their owners' backs," says the little chap.

"You are a good one! Ef all the boys was as cute as you, our locker would not be so near empty. Ef ever there was a born pickpocket, you are the man!"

"I fancy I ain't slow," says the little feller, in a satisfied way. "You see, our biz wants brains, an' that is what I've got. I took these things from two silly girls right in public, an' they none the wiser."

"What are they?"

"A bracelet, pair o' ear-rings, an' couple o' pins; not a long list, but the sparklers are genuine diamonds. Them who lost 'em wouldn't wear notbin' else. It's as pritty a haul as I've made in a long time."

"Bully fer you!"

Tip Higgins had skillfully changed his voice while reporting this conversation, so that Fifth Avenue Fred easily distinguished one speaker from the other, and he almost fancied he could see the two men.

"What then?" he asked.

"They didn't stay tergeth long, but separated an' went in different ways. I'd got interested, an' says I: 'Tip, here's a chance fer you ter do yerself proud an' branch out as a great detective. Foller one on 'em!'"

"Did you do it?" Fred asked.

"Yes, but I'm afeerd I took the wrong one. I picked out the big feller, an' trotted along after

him at a safe distance. You know the lot where we used ter play marbles?"

"Yes."

"Well, my man stopped a little below there, unlocked a door an' went in. I sized up the buildin'. It was a big, awkward affair, which looked as if Christopher Columbus might 'a' built it. I couldn't see no sign that the upper part was used fer anything, an' it looked like a reg'lar rusty old coffin fer Time. Where the man went in was a pawnbroker's shop, an' I read the name over the door. It was Mordecai Josephson."

"Nothing Jewish about that."

"Nor about the man. I mean this; I seen him well enough ter size him up pretty well, an' he was no Jew. He may be Josephson, an' he may not; but he ain't no Jew. Fred, that's a thieves' crib."

"It ain't the only pawnbroker-shop that's in the same business."

"I've been thinkin' this over," continued Tip, earnestly, "an' I'm goin' ter look inter it all I kin. Wish I knowed who the other feller was. Seems he's a bold pickpocket, fer he took this jewelry right off the girls who was wearin' it. I'd like ter ketch that feller."

"Go in!"

"You don't seem ter cotton ter my doin' so, though."

"Yes, I do; and I'd help you, if I had time. Possibly I shall hear of somebody who has been robbed in that very way, for I'm right in the swim with the high and lofty ones who wear diamonds. Go in, Tip, my boy, and if you get to be a great detective, nobody will be so ready to take off his hat to you as I. Maybe I can help you, later. Anyhow, go in, Tip; go in!"

CHAPTER II.

THE CROOKS OF NEW YORK.

FIFTH AVENUE FRED was for the time fired with the same spirit which made Tip Higgins anxious to win detective honors, but, as their conversation continued, his mood again changed. He no longer urged his friend to "go in!"

"You keep away from this gang," he advised. "If you don't, one of several things is sure to happen. If they catch you spying on them, they are dead sure to do you up—drop you in the river to keep company with the fish, maybe. Or, if they see fit, they'll hand you over to the police, putting their own crimes on you, and call you a thief. Lastly, if none of these things happen, suppose you do get a point and go to the police? Why, they would just sit down on you. Detective work is not for boys."

It was a sensible, earnest warning, but Tip was too much interested in his plan to heed it. He had a good deal of confidence in himself, and thought he would be able to win glory without any unpleasant appendages.

Fred could not spare a very long time from his duties at Rosecastle's, and when they had talked awhile, he left the place and started on his return.

Tip, left alone, had nothing in particular to do, so he walked slowly away until he reached Fourteenth street. This thoroughfare he followed westward until his attention was attracted by a crowd assembled in front of the door of a bank.

A crowd always has a strong fascination for a boy, and Tip was not unlike other boys. He hurried to the quarter of interest, and with the skill, pertinacity and want of ceremony peculiar to his age, wormed himself into the center of the group.

These citizens had not been assembled by anything more important than an ordinary street scene, but it sufficed to keep them there and Tip proceeded to get his share of the fun.

He was thus occupied when he saw a tall, muscular man come out of the bank. The boy noticed him particularly, noting his haughty, imperious air and good clothes—especially, a diamond pin which blazed in a fold of his necktie.

"Jerusha! but ain't it a sparkler!" Tip muttered.

The aristocratic-looking person was evidently above pausing to learn the cause of a street gathering, and he endeavored to push his way through. Not being small and skillful like Tip, he found this no small task, and immediately lost his patience.

"What do you mean by blocking the sidewalk thus?" he sharply demanded.

"Ain't you doin' your share?" demanded a facetious person.

"I am no curious old woman, and I demand passage here. Get out of the way, will you?"

If the imperious person had used patience and

good temper, he would not have found any great trouble, but a crowd is never obliging to a man who tries to act the part of a battering-ram; and they remained so indifferent to his angry remonstrances that his progress was very slow.

Tip Higgins was watching him, and thus became witness to a transaction not on the programme.

As the crowd squeezed the man in, Tip suddenly saw a human hand glide quietly toward the stranger's necktie, seize the diamond pin and unfasten it. Then the hand as neatly moved away; the stranger was robbed, yet not aware of his loss!

Tip's gaze was upon the thief, and he did not intend to let the affair pass unmentioned.

He grasped the aristocrat's arm.

"Hold on!" he cried. "You've been robbed!"

The man turned an angry face.

"Stand back, or I'll have you arrested!" he declared.

"But that man has got yer diamond pin, an' is makin' off wid it!"

And the boy pointed to the thief.

The victim clapped his hand to the dismantled necktie.

"You are right!" he declared. "Out of the way!—let me get at the fellow!"

He tried to make a rush, and the crowd was stirred up like the ocean in a storm. Tip found himself almost flattened out in the crush. He lost sight of the thief, and, indeed, could see next to nothing for some moments, owing to his lack of stature; but the group finally broke up.

"Where's the thief?" was the general cry.

Sure enough; he was looked for, but not found. When the alarm was given, he had mixed with the other men very promptly, but was there no longer. This fact dawned upon them, but not until each person had wasted considerable time in scanning his neighbors.

"I'll give ten dollars to whoever will point him out!" declared the man who had been robbed.

"Sure, we'll have to catch a glimpse ave him, foorst, sor."

A policeman arrived at this moment, and, with the custom of his kind, began to push those nearest to him, and order them to "Move on!" in that peculiar way which suggests that policemen own all of New York.

"I've been robbed," the victim hastened to explain; "have had a valuable diamond taken right off my person by an adept thief. He has now escaped."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Bonnel Rosecastle."

"Ah!"

Tip Higgins drew a quick breath, and looked with more interest. So this haughty person was the father of Fred Ellis's employer!

"Well, sir, I'll do all I can for you," the officer very servilely declared.

"Find the thief, and I will pay you well."

Mr. Rosecastle was wealthy, and, though angry on account of his loss, he did not intend to make a scene over a money loss in the presence of a crowd, the members of which he despised. He could see that nearly all had to work for a living in some way, and for such men Bonnel had no use.

He walked majestically to the curbstone, entered his private carriage which was waiting, and was driven away.

Tip Higgins scratched his head doubtfully.

"I was the one that give the old gent the tip, an' let it be knowed the thief was at work," he soliloquized. "Don't I, by rights, come in fer a word o' thanks?"

If he did, he had not received the thanks, and he thrust his hands deep into his pockets and sauntered on down Fourteenth street.

"Fred kin hev Bonnel, an' all the rest o' the Posycastles, fer keeps," he decided. "I ain't no use fer sich, an' I sha'n't cry my optikel eyes out ef Bonnel don't ketch his thief."

For the time, the thief was certainly safe, and, before Tip returned home, the light-fingered gentleman was seated in a cozy room with another man, smoking, drinking and laughing over his success.

Curiously enough, the other man wore a mask—not a minute caricature of that article, but one which so thoroughly concealed his whole face and head as to make him unrecognizable.

"You have done well, and I am glad to see the members of the band so active. It reminds me of another diamond robbery that has just taken place."

"Another, captain?"

"Yes," the masked man answered.

"What was it?"

"Nothing of importance."

"I like a good story, captain."

"You shall hear it, for this affair is laughable. Up on Murray Hill lives a man named Phineas Hamlin. His family, now at home, consists of himself, his maiden sister, Miss Harriet Hamlin, and his daughter, Mary. Lately, Mary's cousin, Nettie, daughter of Benjamin Reynolds, has been staying at Hamlin's, as her parents are out of town."

"The other day Mary and Nettie went out for the afternoon with two young men, regular Murray Hill dudes; persons slender of waist and narrow of chest, and wedded to eye-glasses, canes and tailors. Their names are G. Percy Rosecastle and Montmorency Lestrangle."

"The four went to ride in the Park, and, later, took dinner at a *café*. Anon, it was discovered that the girls had been robbed. Mary Hamlin had lost a diamond pin, while Nettie had lost a pin, a bracelet and her ear-rings."

"All these trinkets were diamonds, and the affair has created some excitement, but more wonder. How were they robbed? They had mixed with no one else, and all assert that no strangers had pushed against them at any time."

"Decidedly odd, captain."

"Humph! We will see. At present, however, it is a great wonder, for how could a thief take Miss Reynolds's ear-rings from their proper place, and she be unaware of the fact?"

"It was a cunning thief. But perhaps she had removed them for some trivial reason."

"She disposes of that possibility by an emphatic denial. Young Rosecastle and Lestrangle are much disturbed by the affair. Only this morning the former called on Phineas Hamlin to see about the affair, but made little by it."

"How was that?"

"Hamlin, though rich, is a very plain, practical man, and one given to pointed speeches in regard to affairs not to his liking. He hopes to recover the lost jewels, but has no disposition to harp on the subject. Well, G. Percy came there bringing his valet in his wake—a lad named Ellis. Hamlin, however, is too truly an American to approve of such a servant, and, ordering the valet brought in for his inspection, indulged in sarcasm until the Anglo-maniac dude was all in a perspiration."

"Severe on him!"

"So he said to his friend, Lestrangle, whom he met going up Fifth avenue."

"But the diamonds stolen from the girls, captain—how do you happen to know of them?"

"My friend," laughed the captain, "you and I live by our wits. What more need be said?"

CHAPTER III.

A DEMAND FOR HUSH-MONEY.

JOHN BRANDT, after his interview with Fred, remained in the Park for several hours. There was no good reason why he should be elsewhere. He had neither business nor a situation, and did not want either.

Like a good many other citizens of New York, he could have done nothing, and done it well, had it not been for one unpleasant fact.

His stomach was a rebel against his pet system. That part of his anatomy demanded food oftener than he could cater to it, and kept him in a state of constant unhappiness.

Possessing a stomach, John Brandt wished to possess wealth also, and a long struggle, rendered useless through many years, had imbittered his whole nature.

He meditated deeply after Fred had left him, turning over in his mind what the youth had said, but finally came to a decision.

Rising abruptly, he walked eastward until he reached the handsome mansion where dwelt Mr. Rosecastle.

Sweeping a quick, covetous glance over the edifice, he ascended the steps and rung the bell. The door was opened promptly by a black boy in uniform, but the black boy looked doubtfully at the applicant. Experienced in his line, the seedy appearance of this person did not warrant great confidence.

However, the "person" was not troubled with doubts or humility. Extending a card, he peremptorily directed:

"Take this to Mr. Bonnel Rosecastle at once, and say that I wish to see him on important business!"

The black boy hesitated, but those keen, hawk-like eyes under the stranger's shaggy brows suddenly lighted up with a fierce gleam, and the nondescript in uniform surrendered at once. Meekly he ushered the applicant into the reception-room, and then went to Mr. Rosecastle and presented the card.

"John Brandt," read the aristocrat. "I do not know the gentleman."

"He said he wished to see you on important business, sir, and was very determined in his way."

The last statement aroused Rosecastle's anger, but a second glance at the card checked the half-formed resolution to make the caller state his business before seeing him—the peculiar, short name, "John Brandt," somehow looked imperious and commanding.

Having changed his mind the gentleman went at once to the reception-room. His first sight of Mr. Brandt was not calculated to increase his good-will; he noted that John was not of high life, and was irritated by the intrusion.

Brandt had risen, but Rosecastle neither asked him to sit down nor himself set the example.

"I am told that you wish to see me," Bonnel began, abruptly and ungracious.

"Yes, sir; I do."

"State your business!"

"Directly, sir. Pray be seated; you will excuse my negligence in not inviting you to do this before!"

There was a very perceptible sneer in Brandt's voice, and an angry gleam in his eyes, as he thus reminded Rosecastle of his breach of politeness, but the hint was ignored.

"State, in few words, what you want."

"You are peremptory."

"I am in my own house."

Brandt shrugged his shoulders.

"How won?"

"Sir?"

"Restrain your airs, for I neither fear nor worship you!" John Brandt sharply retorted. "Blame yourself if our interview is forced upon hostile footing at the start, but—take my advice and get down off your high horse. That's the part of prudence."

Rosecastle was dumfounded by such impudence in his own house, but the stranger had certain influence over him. All things went to show that this man was dangerous, and the half-formed idea of calling a servant and having him ejected was discarded for a time.

He coldly motioned to a seat.

"You disgrace yourself, sir, but I will hear you out. Sit down!"

Brandt obeyed, but the lack of civility still manifest in the other man's manner kept his angry passions alive. His eyes betrayed the snakish, as well as hawkish tendency of his nature, and he was not a pleasant object as he sat there.

"I am listening," Rosecastle reminded.

"You shall hear all you wish. First, I am a speculator in Wall street."

Rosecastle instinctively glanced at the speaker's well-worn garments.

"Bear in mind," the caller added, "that men are oftener down than up 'on the street.' I am down!"

The listener bowed with an air of indifference.

"I have always had a fancy for speculation there," Brandt went on, "though well aware that it was a whirlpool in which a few grew rich at the expense of the unlucky many. I have had my ups and downs, but I never rose higher than the lower half of the ladder. To-day I have some means, but I am on thin ice. Prosperity and ruin are in the balance, with the chances in favor of ruin—utter ruin!"

"What is this to me?"

"I am sure to be ruined unless I have help."

"What are your affairs to me?"

"You were in Wall street once."

"Years ago."

"You, too, saw a crisis."

Rosecastle started and looked at the speaker in a troubled way.

"But you met the crisis—"

"And was wise enough then to leave Wall street forever!"

"How did you meet the crisis?"

"How? Like a man!"

"That depends upon what you consider the way of a man. You saved yourself in Wall street by a hair, and I know how you did it. Strange as my face and name may be to you, I have known of you a long time. You raised money to save yourself in Wall street by boldly stealing securities that had been confidently, but rashly, confided to you; by stealing the last dollar of an orphan boy!"

Rosecastle had grown pale, and the tremor of his features showed that he was alarmed, but his anger was quick enough.

"It is false!"

"'Tis true, and I can prove it. The boy's father was a canal-boat captain, and nobody was surprised when he died worth apparently not a

thousand dollars; but you and I know that he had far more than that. We know that a life of industry and economy had given him twenty thousand dollars—no great sum in comparison with what you have now, but enough at that crisis in your life to save you from ruin. Once saved, you forgot to return the money."

"Absolutely false!"

"It is absolutely true."

"I say 'tis a most villainous falsehood."

"Let us waive discussion on that point. Enough that I am now in the same fix you were some fifteen years ago. You know how to sympathize with me;—will you save me?"

"What do you want?"

"A loan of thirty thousand dollars."

"To be paid when?"

"As soon as the market turns in my favor, which must be soon. All I need is enough to tide over this emergency. Believe me, sir, I am no beggar"—here John Brandt's voice grew firm and proud—"and I only ask a loan. Let me have the money, and you shall be repaid quickly. I promise it solemnly!"

Rosecastle, who had recovered a measure of courage, smiled cynically.

"I do not believe you ever hazarded a dollar in Wall street!" he declared.

"I can prove the fact, but I decline to argue when my veracity is questioned. The point is can I have the loan?"

"No, you cannot!" decidedly.

"Reflect! You are now a millionaire, and would never miss a paltry thirty thousand—"

"I decline to give it."

"Then I shall go to the orphan boy!"

"Why not to your canal-boat captain?"

"He died long ago, but his son lives—lives in want and poverty. He would reward me well if—"

"Go to him at once; I refuse to be victimized by an infamous blackmailer. You can't produce the boy. Go and try it, if you wish; go—get out of my house at once, before I order you kicked out!"

Rosecastle had risen in imperious anger, but John Brandt turned his face away. He was listening to a voice in the hall. Then he suddenly rose, tore open the door and rushed out. There was a brief struggle, then the seedy man returned, dragging Fifth Avenue Fred after him.

"You say I can't produce the boy!" he cried, triumphantly. "Look for yourself; the boy is here! Look and tremble!"

CHAPTER IV.

JOHN BRANDT GAINS A POINT.

IT was a singular and dramatic situation. Fifth Avenue Fred had been captured in the hall without warning, when he paused to deliver a message from Percy to the black boy in uniform, and before he could realize the situation, he had been dragged into the room. He was now confused and perplexed.

John Brandt, on the contrary, stood erect, aggressive and triumphant, one hand on his captive and the other pointing to him, while his gaze was on Bonnel Rosecastle.

The latter looked thoroughly startled at first, but when he saw that the boy in question was only his son's valet, he recovered his composure in a measure.

"Are you mad?" he asked, in sincerity, addressing John Brandt.

"If you think so, put me to the test!" was the swift reply. "I say this youth is the one I named!"

"Boy," Rosecastle cried, turning to Fred, "are you in this plot?"

The valet rallied and assumed the ultra-dignified air he always adopted when addressing his companions of Murray Hill.

"Pardon, sir, but I know of no plot. As for this singular person, who has laid hands upon me with vehement impetuosity, I am wholly at a loss to account for his erratic and reprehensible conduct."

"Do you know him?"

"Never saw him before to-day, sir."

"Enough! The man is mad!"

"Wait!" Brandt ordered. "Tell Rosecastle your name!"

"Certainly, if you wish. I am Frederick Lebanon Ellis."

"Ha! how is that?" Brandt demanded.

The name, or something else, certainly had given Rosecastle a start, and he looked at the valet more attentively.

"Question him, if you wish," added Brandt.

"I have nothing to ask of him," was the haughty reply. "Boy, leave us!"

"Certainly, sir; and I beg that you will not hold me responsible for my unceremonious entrance here. I was captured without warning, and dragged in very much against my will. If there was any cause for such a high-handed and obstreperous course, I am ignorant of the fact."

In this crisis Fifth Avenue Fred was not able to think of as many long words as he would have been glad to employ, but, feeling that he had not done so very ill, he now beat a most systematic retreat.

As the door closed behind him John Brandt nodded to Rosecastle in a peculiar way.

"What do you think now?"

"That boy is my son's valet."

"You heard his name."

"That amounts to nothing."

"The canal-boat captain was named Lebanon Ellis."

"What of it? Even if your fiction were truth, it would be easy enough for you to hire a boy as your aid and try to pass him off as a son of your canal-boat captain."

"Did you not see the boy was taken by surprise?"

"He claimed to be."

"He was, and, what is more, I have no idea of letting him into the secret, if you and I can come to terms. Captain Lebanon Ellis left a son, as you are well aware; that boy is the son, as I am well aware. It was a singular chance, was it not, which brought him into the very house of the man whose treachery forced him to be a servant? He should be worth twenty thousand dollars, plus the interest for some fourteen or more years."

"Insane babbler!"

"Captain Ellis left his property all in bonds. He knew you when you were both boys, and, once, he saved you from drowning. You professed gratitude, and he, simple-minded man, thought that, because you were rich, you were as honest and, perhaps, as much above temptation, as an angel. He gave the bonds to you in trust, leaving not a scrap of paper to show for it."

"A pretty romance!"

"Ellis finally died suddenly. Whether you would have been honest enough to hand over the bonds I don't know, if you had been free from financial need. Most unluckily, you were then in danger of being dashed to pieces on the rocks of Wall street."

"Never!"

"I can prove it."

"By whom?"

"You forget that your old associates will easily remember your exploits in Wall street, and your embarrassments. They remember—I have asked them—that you saved yourself at the last hour by means unknown to them. I can explain the means!"

Rosecastle regarded John Brandt in silence. As the conversation went on he saw the net tightening about him, and he was not so anxious to apply harsh epithets to the seedy man.

"Perhaps you will explain how you can prove this fable about the bonds?" he suggested, at last.

"With pleasure. In order to make use of them, yourself, you had to make them appear as your property, and they stood on the company's books. You resorted to forgery; they were duly transferred from Captain Ellis's ownership to your own, and then you rushed them into Wall street to save your neck. You succeeded, but left traces of your guilt more convincing than any man's testimony. Suppose the case were to go to a jury: Don't you think it would be easy to convict you of forgery and theft?"

"Absurd!"

"Do you want to put it to the proof?"

"One in your position can make out no case against one of my standing."

"Rosecastle, suppose I should go to young Frederick Ellis and say: 'Give me five thousand dollars, and I will give you twenty-five thousand!' Don't you think he would accept the offer?"

Rosecastle was silent.

"He would accept," Jenn Brandt proceeded, "and then I would take him to a good lawyer. How long do you suppose it would take the latter to burst the bubble? Ever since your little break you have lived in danger, for investigation at any time would show what you had done. Now, do you want the investigation made?"

Rosecastle moved uneasily in his chair. His arrogance was all gone; he no longer threatened John Brandt; and, much as the thought irritated him, he felt like making terms with the seedy stranger.

"I admit nothing, and no part of what you

allege," he finally said, "but I dislike to have any scandal."

John Brandt bowed.

"Naturally my dear sir."

"The price you name is exorbitant."

"You would never miss it."

"Is thirty thousand dollars a mere flea-bite?"

"To you, yes."

"Make your figures reasonable."

"What do you want?"

"One thing I must have—time to withdraw money so that no one need speculate on the matter, now or hereafter. I would not have any one prying into my transactions any more now than in the past."

"How much time do you want?"

John Brandt, cool and firm as he was, betrayed his eagerness. His eyes glittered, and his hands worked on his worn knees as if he already felt the caressing touch of the money.

"Probably I could pay a part—say one-half—at the end of a week. The rest would soon follow. But the sum you name I cannot, and will not, hand over."

"What will you give?"

John Brandt was no longer the cool and iron-like claimant. He was not a Wall street speculator, and never had been; he was simply a needy adventurer who had lived from hand to mouth and often, barely lived, for many years. If his garments were seedy it was not an indication of decayed gentility; he had bought them of a pawnbroker to whom the original owner had disposed of them. The idea of getting some money, after all his years of close calculation and hard battle for bread, took away John's nerve and set him trembling with great eagerness and desire.

"Not over ten thousand," asserted Rosecastle, answering the last question.

Ten thousand! The mere words made Brandt gasp.

"In cash?"

"In cash."

"Do you promise to give that?"

"I promise nothing. When the money is collected I shall make you prove that this boy is a son of Captain Lebanon Ellis."

"Easily done!"

Brandt rallied. The delirium of gold left him, and recovering his shrewdness, he haggled over the amount with cunning coolness. Rosecastle, however, remained firm, and the matter ended just as he wished; he was given one week in which to raise a part of the money, and then negotiations were to be concluded.

When he had taken Brandt's residence, the latter was ready to go. He went in good order, exhibiting the same firmness which had stood him in such good service during the early part of the interview, but, once on the street and out of sight of the house, he broke into chuckles of delight. He was conducting himself in this manner when a voice sounded at his elbow.

"Hallo, old Chicken Hawk! Ticked about something, aren't you?"

John looked up hurriedly and saw Fifth Avenue Fred. The latter's mode of address was not very polite, but he had not forgiven Brandt for nearly pulling his coat off in the house when dragging him into Rosecastle's presence, and the term "Hawk" seemed too appropriate to be lost.

Brandt regarded him sourly.

"What do you want, boy?"

"I don't want to be yanked around by the scruff of my neck, general."

"Well, well, go and play."

"Play! Do I look like a top-spinner? Say, what did you mean by telling the old gent I was 'the boy'? What boy? What did Bonnel R. care about me? What did you care? Why did you fall on me so?"

"Never mind; never mind! Go and play!"

Speaking peevishly, Brandt was hurrying along, but Frederick kept at his side.

"See here, admiral, I want to know about this."

"Clear out, you rascal!"

"You told Rosecastle I was 'the boy.' What boy?"

"Beggar! will you be off?"

"Don't know whether I will or not, but I don't want to be dragged into public and put on exhibition like a living skeleton, fat woman or two-headed cow, and have no bill of particulars. See?"

"Boy, the matter was one that don't concern you. Let me hear no more about it. Mr. Rosecastle and I had business; that's all there was to it. Now, give me no more of your idle talk, or I will chastise you!"

"Better take a contract to furnish hen's teeth

for the market. You would find there was a good deal more of me than your bid would call for, and that two could play the game."

"Bah!"

Brandt was still hurrying along, and the last exclamation was intended to represent deep disgust. Fred saw that he could make nothing by persisting in his attempt, and he gave up the pursuit.

"All right, Mr. Hawk!" he commented. "We'll dissolve partnership for now, but I may yet call around at Bloomingdale to see you. So long!"

The speaker returned to Rosecastle's residence in a thoughtful mood.

Can't imagine what the racket was when Hawk pulled me in so sudden. Should really think he was crazy, but he managed to get and hold Bonnel's attention. Bonnel looked all stirred up, too, as if he was scared by something. But why should Hawk yank me into the charmed circle in order to point a moral? Can't guess that!"

It was an interesting conundrum, but one too obscure to be solved without more light. He gave it up with the natural thought:

"I only hope it won't cost me my job. Bonnel may be wrathful because I intruded on him so unceremoniously."

CHAPTER V.

A HOUSE OF FORBIDDING APPEARANCE.

FIFTH AVENUE FRED entered the house with the fear that he would be summoned to Rosecastle's presence at once, but he would have been surprised had he known the radically different thoughts that were in that gentleman's mind. Rosecastle stood by the window, concealed by the curtains, and, forgetful alike of his wealth and position as one of the noble Four Hundred, watched his son's valet narrowly and eagerly.

"Can he be Lebanon Ellis's son?" muttered the rich man. "I see no marked resemblance, though his hair and eyes were like Lebanon's as I first knew the latter. This boy is more graceful, more refined, withal; but that may have come from his mother. By heavens! I believe there is a certain likeness!"

Fred entered at the basement, but Bonnel kept his place, and his thoughts flowed on.

"If he is Ellis's son there is a deep conspiracy against me. Of course this Brandt has lied to the limit; it was not chance that made the boy an inmate of my house. Brandt put him here. But, is the boy in the secret? Brandt is avaricious enough to want all the money, and he may be using the boy as an unconscious cat's-paw. What am I to do?"

He studied the situation carefully.

"Of course I shall not give the blackmailer a cent. Once let him get his grip on me and he would never let up. No; I must beat him out; silence him in some way. And the boy? Of course he must be disposed of, too. I'll see Percy, at once!"

He touched the bell, and, in due time, his son was in his presence. After a little preliminary talk he came to the point.

"How do you like your valet?"

"Very well; he is willing and ingenious, and has a strikingly accurate realization of his own inferiority," Percy replied.

"What is his name?"

"Fred Ellis."

"Where did you engage him?"

"At Denboyne's Select Employment Agency for Valets."

"Who and what is he?"

"Dear me, I don't know; I have had no curiosity in regard to one of such humble origin."

"But you made some inquiries?"

"Yes. I desired an English valet, and told Denboyne so, but he said that the present demand was for Americans; that English servants, however satisfactory they might be at home, were imbued with the idea that Americans, one and all, were dreadfully inferior as a race, and would really think themselves better than their masters if transferred here. Of course I would not take a man with such views, although, of course, our people are inferior to the English."

Percy twirled his eyeglass as he gave utterance to these remarkable sentiments, and looked deeply humiliated; and, indeed, if he could have seen himself as he was, he might well have recognized inferiority, as far as he was himself concerned, not only to Englishmen but to all Americans outside the nondescript class known as "dudes."

"What did he say about Ellis?" asked Bonnel.

"That the youth had had no previous experience, but had been trained carefully under his own eyes."

"Did you inquire as to the boy's antecedents?"

"Most certainly. I learned that his father had been captain of a canal-boat—what a horrible occupation!—and that the boy was now an orphan."

"Is Denboyne a reliable man?"

"He is a treasure—really, a treasure!"

It had been the elder Rosecastle's idea that Fred had been palmed off upon his son by some sharp trick, which was a part of the larger plot, but the evidence did not bear out the theory. Perhaps, after all, he had come there in the natural course of events, but this did not hide the fact that he was a person too dangerous to remain.

Quieting any curiosity Percy might have had as to the object of this inquiry, Bonnel ended the conversation. He could not so easily dispose of the danger that menaced him, but he was a strong-minded man, and he set to work to discover some way.

Fred must leave the Rosecastle residence, and that, too, speedily; he must disappear forever; but how?

The schemer passed half an hour in meditation, and then rose and left the house. He did not explain where he was going, or order his carriage, but took the Third Avenue Elevated Road and went down-town.

It was almost six o'clock when he returned, but he was on hand to eat with the family, and seemed to be in his most placid and self-satisfied mood.

Shortly after dinner was finished Fifth Avenue Fred was summoned to Percy's room.

"I am going out this evening," explained the young man, "and want you to make me ready. After that, I have a note which I wish you to carry down-town and deliver in person."

"Very well, sir," replied the valet, in his most unctuous manner.

It was no easy task to get Percy ready. His vanity was far deeper than his mind, and, having an idea that the attire of a "perfect gentleman," as he termed it, should be immaculate in all respects, he was as fastidious in regard to the sleeves of his shirt as the legs of his trousers, and could tolerate no unsymmetrical wrinkles.

Fred, who had analyzed him perfectly, humored all these foibles, so he patted and shaped the sleeves on every occasion with great outward gravity, but with many a sly wink and grimace behind Percy's back.

The ways of this offshoot of aristocracy were an unending source of amusement to the practical valet.

After Percy was arranged in faultless style, Fred received the note to which the former had referred.

"Remember to take it in person, and wait for an answer," Percy directed.

Fred answered in his best manner, and then found his hat and left the house. Under the light of a street-lamp he paused to look at the superscription.

"Hallo! takes me down close to the building Tip Higgins was telling about. Must be mighty near the same old rookery. Maybe I'm to negotiate a loan on Percy's jewels at the pawn-shop! Anyhow, I'll dance around and take Tip into partnership for the trip; he'd like to see his old friends again. Speaking of jewels, this may be the means of his spotting the game he wants to play detective on. Queer chick, Tip is!"

It was not hard to find his young friend, and Tip eagerly accepted the chance to accompany him.

"Look at the address!" Fred directed.

Tip obeyed, and then turned a pair of big, round eyes upon his companion.

"Say, b'gosh! that's the old buildin' over Mor-decai Josephson's pawn-shop!"

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"Then you're in luck; you'll have the chance to see the inside of the building, and your great detective scheme will jump and blossom like a rose in the desert."

"But I can't understand it. I tol' yer afore thet there wasn't no sign o' the buildin' bein' occupied up-stairs, an' now we're ter go there wid a note."

"We may find a perfect palace. You can't bet on the inside of a house by the outside. Come on!"

They went, but Fred did not criticise Tip's opinions after a look at the building. It was a grim old place, and bore no signs of life except within the pawn-shop. On the other half of the lower floor was a good-sized store, but it was closed and dark. The pawn-shop was doing no business, but a man was inside who looked like

a Jew, as far as features went. He was not the person Tip had followed there.

"Let's interview his nibs," Tip suggested.

"A good scheme, and we'll do it."

They entered the store, and Frederick proceeded with the interviewing.

"Mr. Josephson?"

"That's my name," the pawnbroker assured, without giving any evidence of Jewish origin in voice or manner.

"Who are the folks up-stairs? if I'm not troubling you too much by asking."

"Well, my little man, there is Mr. Brown, Mr. Dexter, Mr. Loftus, and their families."

"I don't see any light, or any sign of life."

"The front of the building is a work-shop, when in use, and the people live at the rear. It is an odd arrangement, but made so as to give the workmen full light from the street."

"Just so. Much obliged, sir."

The boys went out, and Mordecai turned at once to his work, seeming to feel no interest in their affairs.

"It is an odd arrangement!" Fred agreed. "Our American Jew is correct on that point, if he has got a snaky eye. I don't like him for a cent. Well, Tip, shall we pull the tinkler?"

Fred indicated the door-bell.

"Yes; go ahead, but keep yer revolver handy."

Young Higgins spoke in a humorous way, as, of course, neither of them had a revolver; but both he and Fred looked at the building without finding any new qualities of a prepossessing nature.

Fred pulled the bell; or, at least, went through the motion, for he heard no sound inside to indicate that he had given the desired notice to the occupants. He began to have actual doubt on that point when the seconds passed without bringing any one to view; but a second pull was more successful.

The door opened, and a small girl appeared in the aperture. She looked to be less than ten, and was swarthy and precocious of face, but her expression was pleasant and beaming.

"Mr. Dexter in?" asked Fred.

"Yes, sir; my papa is here," was her ready answer.

"I've got a letter here which I am to deliver in person."

"You had better come in; my papa is very lame with rheumatism, and can't walk well."

She stepped back and gave them ample room, and they entered. Neither was reluctant to see the old building, and the youth and pleasant manner of the small girl had in a great measure dispelled the doubts they at first felt.

She closed the door, and then conducted them up a pair of uncarpeted stairs. Their feet rung on the boards with a hollow sound, and the building had all the aspect of a deserted house, but they took a practical view of this fact and decided that it was to be expected, if the front of the edifice was an unoccupied work-room.

Holding the dim light, the girl flitted along across a hall and opened another door, and stronger light then became visible. She stepped back and bowed politely.

"Please to walk in!" she directed.

Fred led the way. He expected to see the living room of a family poor in worldly goods but rich in children, and had pictured Mr. Dexter as a man doubled up like a pocket-knife with rheumatism. He did not see anything of the kind; he saw, instead, a scantily-furnished room which seemed to be somebody's bedroom, and that, too, of a man not given to display.

Tip had followed his friend closely, and both paused a moment to see the place. Then Fred turned to receive fresh directions from the girl, but was surprised to see that she had disappeared.

The door had been closed, and they were alone.

"This is a queer go!" commented the older boy, "but I guess all we have to do is to wait until Dexter comes."

"Fred, I don't more'n half like this," Tip confessed.

"You like it just five-fourths more than I do!"

"Why did the gal shut us in an' skip?"

Fifth Avenue Fred glanced toward the door.

"Maybe she'll be back in a jiff."

They looked around in unabated curiosity. A large kerosene lamp stood on a small stand, lighting the room well. The window was curtained. The room did not look like one where anybody took his ease, and the boys soon turned their eyes upon the door. No one came, and the silence of the place was profound. Obeying a sudden impulse, Fred moved to the door, turned the knob and tried to open it. Then he turned

back with a blank face which found echo in Tip Higgins's.

"Locked in, by jinks!" Fred declared.

CHAPTER VI.

FRED AND TIP HAVE A SURPRISE.

THE two friends gazed at each other in a puzzled way. Despite all the doubts they had felt in regard to the building they could hardly believe the evidence of their own senses, and Fred actually turned to the door and tried it again, to see if there was not some mistake. It was locked, sure enough.

"Trapped!" he exclaimed.

"What does it mean?" Tip demanded.

"Give it up!"

"I wouldn't 'a' thought it of that gal."

"Me, too!"

"Can't we git out?"

"Might smash the door, I suppose."

"It looks strong."

"Right you are, Mr. Higgins!"

"What can they want of us?"

"My unsophisticated friend," the valet returned, "this is a conundrum that might rattle heads older and wiser than our young craniums. If anybody had reason to want us put in quod I should say it was a put-up job, right from the start, but, without me, G. Percy would have no one to pat the wrinkles out of his shirt-sleeves. I feel strong symptoms of rising Ebenezer when I remember how that smiling small damsel towed us in. If this was a preconceived job, the damsel was selected to guide us in order to lull our suspicions—who could suspect such a small specimen as she is? On the whole, we may be hasty; let's wait a bit for Mr. Rheumatic Dexter before we get on our hind legs and howl."

Fred's cool and humorous remarks had much to do with reassuring Tip, and they sat down and proceeded to give the situation a fair test.

"But I never heard of a visitor bein' locked in so," observed Tip.

"It ain't Murray Hill style, but there is a certain look about you that betrays a hankering for spoons."

"A mean person can say mean things when he tries," retorted Tip.

Their brief display of light spirits was soon over, and Fred sprang up, determined to bring matters to a crisis.

"We're not to be locked in like rats, and I'll show them so, be their game what it may," he declared.

Going to the door he rapped loudly. He did not expect this to bring any response, and it did not. The knock echoed hollowly, but no one appeared to ask the cause of it. He repeated the knock, and each time added force to the pounding, but all in vain. When he had kept it up for several minutes, he suddenly turned to Tip.

"We're prisoners!"

"What fer?"

"You say; you wanted to act detective on this old ranch, and the chance of your life has come. Play the game for all it's worth."

"But why should they lock us in?"

Fred did not answer at once. He did not have any confidence in the people of the house to lose, but there were other points to be considered.

"I don't see why they should gobble us off-hand," he remarked, thoughtfully. "Why should they? We carry no money, and nobody could raise a ransom off of us. It looks like a put-up job on somebody's part, but what in creation is there about us that any one should scoop us in?"

"Did you say Percy Rosecastle sent you?"

"Yes."

"He ain't mad at you, is he?"

"No; and what if he was? Would he take all this trouble with a servant? He would simply fire me, and that would be the end of it. Percy isn't in it."

For a moment Fred thought of his unceremonious, though involuntary intrusion upon Bonnel Rosecastle, but rejected the subject as unworthy of consideration.

"What are we goin' ter do?"

"Get out, by Jinks!"

With long steps Fred went to the window and ran up the shade. A close-fitting iron shutter beyond met his gaze, and he saw how admirably the room was calculated for a prison. The shutter had been put on years before, but was unlike the ordinary iron shutter of business. It fitted closely, and, when he tried to separate the two halves and throw them back, he found that they were secured in some unusual way. They resisted all his efforts, and he gave it up.

"This looks just like the Dark Ages," he declared.

"What are we goin' ter do?"

"My beloved friend, I wish you wouldn't put

that question to me again; you've done it not less than a dozen times already."

"But I don't mean ter be shut up here!" Tip declared. "We ain't done nothin' ter deserve it, an' it goes ag'in' my grain. Karl Von Schlittburg, who lives nigh me, says liberty is granted every American citizen by the Constitutional. I don't see how he knows, fer he's only been in this country two years, but I want my liberty, an' I'm goin' ter hev it!"

"Bully for you, pard! Your grit fills me with deep admiration, and I guess you're the one to whoop things up. You overheard two men talking about stolen diamonds, and followed one of them here. My opinion is that they are onto your racket, and have sat down on you. Say, how do you like the detective biz, anyhow?"

Tip looked somewhat crestfallen.

"I ain't beat, yit."

"You're nigh it."

"There's only one thing fer us ter do."

"What's that?"

"Bu'st the door!"

"I've bin thinking of that, but don't see just the thing to do it with, unless we take the bed to pieces. First, I'll try the stand, but it looks aged and feeble. However, here goes!"

He lifted the stand, and, using it as a club, began to shower blow after blow upon the door, directing his efforts to a point near the lock. He could not see that he affected the door greatly, but did soon succeed in breaking the stand.

This did not discourage him, and he used what was left and kept up the attack. He made a tremendous racket, and began to hope that he could draw attention from the street.

The weapon proved to be fragile, however, and the door strong, and he finally used up the former without injuring the latter. Then he flung the battered remnant away.

"Whoever built this old ark meant that things should stay forever!" he irritably declared.

"Includin' us," added Tip, mournfully.

"Exactly."

"Let's yell!"

"Who would come first!—the police, or our enemies?"

"Do you think them skunks is nigh?"

"Sure! We are in a den of iniquity, Tip. You were right in sizing the pawn-shop up as bad medicine. Mordecai Josephson is in this plot; he said three families lived here, and he lied when he said it. He had beed posted, and helped to trap us. It wouldn't surprise me if we were in a regular thieves' den. Mordecai keeps the pawn-shop and runs the open-faced part of the biz, but, like a watch, most of the machinery is out of sight."

"I'm goin' ter show them up afore I git through!" stoutly declared Tip, sticking to his resolution to be a detective.

"We've got to show up, and out, ourselves, first."

"Ahem!"

Both boys had turned quickly as this sound reached their hearing, coming from behind them. It proved that they were no longer alone, and neither was surprised to see a man standing at one side of the room; but Fifth Avenue Fred was surprised when he recognized the hawk-like stranger who had pulled him into Bonnel Rosecastle's presence so unceremoniously.

"So you are here!" he exclaimed, abruptly.

"I am here," John Brandt replied, calmly.

"I might have known no rascality would be going on without your having a hand in it."

Brandt made a quick gesture.

"Don't condemn me hastily. If you think I am in any way responsible for your present misfortunes, you are wrong. On the other hand, I am just as anxious as you are to get you away, and I'll prove the fact by doing it."

"If you're not in the gang, how do you happen to be here?"

"Because I know more than the gang. I saw you come in, and suspected that you were in danger. Who sent you?"

"Percy Rosecastle."

"Ah! so the pot is boiling! Well, I used to work in this building, and know more about it than the knaves who now herd here. You see where I came in?"

He pointed to the western wall, at a point near the bed. The boys had seen no door there, and no break in the wall, yet there was an open door now.

"This is no old-time house of secret passages," Brandt added, "but the plainest of work-shops. I set that door in place myself, and made it invisible to casual gaze so that the watchman, who slept here, would have neater-looking quarters—"

it was his fancy, carried out by me. Now, I am going to take you away—"

Tip Higgins suddenly held up a warning hand.

"Footsteps in the hall!" he announced.

John Brandt drew a revolver.

"Be silent!" he ordered. "Keep near me, and be prepared to fight for your lives!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE CAPTAIN OF THE BAND APPEARS.

THE footsteps outside had ceased to sound, and it was plain that the unseen person had paused by the door to listen. Fifth Avenue Fred had a sudden idea, and he gave Tip Higgins a poke in the ribs.

"Guess we're in for it; old man," he observed, in a distinct voice, "and we may as well make the best of it. Of course it's an accident, and we shall be all right as soon as somebody finds out what is up."

Tip took the hint and replied:

"That's the way I figger it up."

"Here's a bed; if necessary, we can lie down and rest easy until morning. Then we are sure to be let out."

"Jes' so."

"Wish we had some marbles, so we could have a game."

"Or checkers."

What effect this apparently innocent, but really, wily conversation had on the unseen listener could not be known, but that person was soon heard moving stealthily away. John Brandt lowered his revolver.

"You showed quick wit, boy, and I hope it may have worked as you intended, but they will be foolish to be lulled so easily," John remarked. "I was about to bid you follow me out of the room, but you began your artifice, and I let you go on. Now, follow me! I am not sure that I can get you out, but any place is better than this room, where they have seen fit to herd you."

"Why did they do it?" Fred asked.

"Impossible to say. Now, come on; time is precious, and we must lose none. There are desperate men in this building, and, though I am unknown to them, I should be no protection to you if we were discovered, except what I might do by fighting."

Fred saw that Brandt was not disposed to speak freely, but this did not change the former's opinion that the latter knew much, if not all, about the matter. Certainly, Brandt was one who had made himself liable to all kinds of surmises.

Leaving the first room they entered one that was long and unfurnished, though several dilapidated articles which stood around told that the former business occupants had used it in some way.

When the door was closed the adventurers were in total darkness, but they found their way to a second door which Brandt opened, and where he proceeded to listen.

"From this point there is but one way out," he explained. "It leads through a room where, as I learned to-night, the gang has been in the habit of meeting—doubtless a place for smoking, drinking and social talk. There, too, perhaps their schemes were matured. No one was in this room when I was there a little while ago; I hope no one is there now."

"You carry a revolver."

"I do; and, if need be, shall use it!"

The man of mystery spoke in a determined voice which made the boys feel uneasy. They were not in the habit of associating with persons who resorted to the use of revolvers, and though, in the present case, it seemed justifiable to escape at all hazards, Brandt stood revealed by his own manner as a desperate man.

"The Evil One leads," Fred whispered to Tip; "let's see what sort of a guide he makes."

Brandt felt his way across another apartment, and opened another door. It made a sudden and important change in the situation.

Fred saw a room of considerable size, and in it were tables and chairs, such as were generally used for saloons. A light was burning, and it revealed two men—rough-looking fellows—at one of the tables. Both were smoking, and a bottle of beer stood by the elbow of each.

"Bad!" whispered Brandt; "but we must go on, all the same. Others are liable to gather, and they may fill up this room until we can't pass. We must get out, and our only way is to steal across this room. See yonder door?"

"Yes," both boys replied.

"Can you get there on the sly?"

"We kin try."

"It's risky business."

"We're good for it."

"Then we'll go. Move like ghosts, and if those men look around, sink down back of the table you are nearest to. Notice that the solitary lamp only lights a part of the place. We shall move in the shadow, and with due share of luck, ought to make the rifle. Come!"

Silently and carefully the three began the journey. The boys, at least, were a good deal wrought up; such an adventure was new to them, and discovery seemed almost certain. True, the strangers were busy with their beer and conversation, and Fred felt that he could not sit there and be ignorant of the fact if any one was crossing the floor.

He watched the men with breathless attention, but the necessary distance was safely cut down until one-half of it was traversed, and all seemed in the most promising condition when—

Suddenly the door in front of them opened!

Only the prolonged grating of its hinges saved them from discovery, but warning was thus given, and all proved quick-witted enough to profit by it. They dropped down in covert, Brandt and Tip at one table, and Fred at another.

Then the latter saw two more men enter. One was a large person of middle age, who did not receive more than passing notice, but his companion was of most unusual appearance for the prosaic side of every-day life.

He was less than the usual size of men, and noticeably slender and narrow-chested; indeed, his weight could not have been one hundred and twenty pounds. But it was not this that Fred noticed. In the city of New York, and the year 1890, this person wore a mask which would have done credit to the Middle Ages.

It was no stage-mask, designed to hide only the wearer's cheek-bone and make disguise a farce, but a long, broad contrivance which so thoroughly shut in his face that he might have been white, black or yellow, so far as any visible signs gave testimony.

Fred had not expected any such novelty, but it only served to arouse his interest all the more; a man who was so anxious to hide his identity from even his associates in crime must have some strong interest in doing it.

The former occupants of the room at once assumed a quiet, humble manner, as if in the presence of a superior.

The new-comers sat down at a table, and so near to Fred that he could almost touch them.

"Anything new, captain?" asked the larger man.

"No; but I've brought the sparklers I told you about. I want money on them to-night."

"All right, captain."

"I am in a run of ill-luck in various ways, and only took these trinkets because hard-pressed. I hardly ever run a bigger risk, and should now feel razzled were it not for the fact that I rely on the idiocy of a shallow-pated girl. Look at them!"

He flung a box in front of the larger man, but Fred looked, not at the box, but at the "captain." It had not required many words for him to decide that he had heard that voice before! But where? He tried in vain to think. Rapidly he made a summary of the persons to be suspected, but none of them filled the bill.

Every moment, however, his opinion grew firmer; if the "captain" was unmasked the boy would see a familiar face.

It was a singular and interesting discovery. Exclamations of admiration from the larger man caused Fred to look at the jewels just taken from the box. From his position he could see but little of them, but the glitter indicated that they were diamonds, and he saw a bracelet, a pair of ear-rings and two pins.

"Dead pure!" declared the unknown.

"Beyond doubt," agreed the captain.

"You struck no common game this time."

"No."

"Murray Hill dames, I should say."

The captain was silent.

"Is there likely to be a row over them?"

"Yes."

"They must be held for a while."

"Of course; and don't be deceived by appearances. The owners will not make the affair public; all will seem to be dead quiet; but the search will be on, just the same. With a first-class detective on the scent, it will never do for Mordecai to have these twinklers in his shop. They must be put away where no hounds of law will scent them. See?"

"Yes, captain, and all shall be as you desire."

"What ought I to have on them?"

The second man now exhibited a degree of caution which showed that even the captain

could not demand just what he wished on plunder, and while they were talking Fifth Avenue Fred used his eyes freely to size up the situation.

The door, and way of escape, was aggravatingly near, but might as well have been far away. Anxious as he was, he could not leave the table without being detected.

He could only crouch on the floor and wish for better things. The chances, however, were against him and his companion. Had the room been well lighted, discovery must have followed quickly, and, as it was, if one of the gang chanced to glance in the right direction, the dark objects under the tables must be seen.

The greatest danger was that more men would enter the room. If they came, all would be lost unless the little party could fight their way out.

Fred looked at John Brandt and wished that he dared to suggest a dash for liberty, but John was too far away.

The matter of the diamonds having been settled, the unknown man continued:

"Our next meeting will be important, captain. Several of the boys have formed plans of operation, and are eager to have you pass judgment on them."

"The more, the merrier."

"They say there's money in them."

"I hope so. This fat city of New York owes us a living. Look at the money being fooled away on public buildings and private ventures—buildings that reach almost as high as the Tower of Babel. If men can afford to do all this, they can also afford to divide with us."

"You are a true Socialist, captain."

"I'm a fellow in hard luck, too lazy to work, and bound to have a living."

"There are lots like you."

"Few who are so reckless, though."

"True. Why, if even our men knew who you are—"

"Not a word!" exclaimed the captain. "Drop all that. You know me; no one else here must!"

Fred listened breathlessly. That voice! Where had he heard it in the past? Again he tried to decide; again he failed to get the clew.

"All right," continued the captain's friend.

"By the way, we have prisoners up-stairs."

"Prisoners! How is that?"

"A man whom I know came to me and made me a good offer to hold a boy as captive here until he could dispose of him. The youngster was decoyed here by a letter, and I closed the door on him, with the help of Mordecai's daughter."

"You said 'prisoners.'"

"A second boy was unlucky enough to accompany the first, and both had to be bagged."

"And both are up there now?"

"Yes; in the porter's room."

"I don't approve of that!" declared the captain, forcibly.

"Why not?"

"Deuce take it, man! do you want to add fifty per cent. to our risks? We do a quiet business and ought not to be nabbed, but, for a few miserable dollars, you pile a mountain on our risk. Those boys are liable to ruin us!"

"I'll look out for them."

"Perhaps you will; perhaps not. Some time they'll get their liberty, and then where will we be? I tell you I don't approve of it, and you've made a bad break. I wish they had been in Jericho before ever you saw them. Hang it! you have acted the fool, Dan!"

CHAPTER VIII.

BEHIND THE LOCKED DOOR.

THE captain was angry, and the fact was apparent in his manner as well as words. Dan made a humble apology, but did not succeed in quieting the storm.

"The damage is done, and nothing can undo it," the leader asserted. "All we can do now is to hold fast to the boys, and I trust you'll manage that. If you take them out on the river, and dump them in with paving-stones tied to them, I shall make no row. Strangle the young vipers, or they will sting us yet. You can depend on that!"

At this moment one of the first men in the room rose and moved toward the door. His course took him close to Fifth Avenue Fred, and the latter grew alarmed.

It seemed impossible for the fellow to pass without seeing the crouching figure under the table.

The man, however, fixed his gaze upon the captain, and did not turn it away until he re-

ceived a nod of recognition from that august individual. He answered it with a respectful salute, and all would have gone well had he not, in doing this, utterly neglected to see where he was going.

The result of such carelessness was startling. He infringed upon the territory occupied by a chair, caught his foot against one of its legs, and then plunged forward directly under the table. Worse than that, he came down squarely upon Fred, and then rolled away with a cry of surprise.

That alarm proved that secrecy was no longer in the question. Fred had been discovered, and there was only one way open to him. He accepted the solitary chance with dispatch and agility.

Springing to his feet, he made a rush for the door, and Tip and John Brandt were not slow to follow his example. The three darted across the floor at full speed.

It was a total surprise for the gang, and there was profound silence for a moment, but Dan suddenly found his voice.

"A spy!—a spy!" he shouted.

The fugitives passed the door!

"This way!" cried Brandt, hurriedly. "The stairs are here, and a street-door at their foot. Come on!"

The lately-silent room behind them was transformed into one of noise and confusion. The law-breakers there were sufficiently in fear of the police to be stirred up easily, and they had reason to dread the result if the supposed spies escaped. Out they came in haste, but all would have been well with the fugitives but for an unlucky state of affairs below. They had clattered down the stairs, but when Brandt tried to open the street-door there was delay.

"The key!—the key!" he exclaimed.

"Is the pesky thing locked?" Tip asked, plaintively.

"Yes; and the key gone!"

"Then I guess we're in for it!"

The pursuers appeared at the head of the stairs.

"Run them down!" the captain ordered. "Stop them at all hazards—with lead, if necessary."

Down the stairs came the furious gang.

"So be it!" hissed John Brandt. "I never have shed any one's blood, but it means death if we are caught by these tigers. I'll sell my life as dearly as possible!"

The next moment Fred heard John's revolver cocked, and it became evident that, unless there was a turn of the tide, there would be desperate work done in that dark hall.

It was a terrible possibility, for human life was a thing too sacred to be meddled with between man and man; but they were on the defensive, with ruffians opposed to them.

Fred drew a deep breath and braced himself, determined to aid Brandt all he could, but once more the scene took a sudden change.

Great was the surprise of the imperiled trio when the door gently opened, and the quiet street lay revealed to their gaze like a haven of safety.

It was no work of magic; a man stood on the threshold, key in hand, and all realized that he was one of the band. He had paused in irresolution as the open door brought the noise to his hearing, but he was given but little time to investigate.

Brandt made a quick turn, sent out one of his fists, and the fellow went over like a ten-pin.

"Run!" hissed the resolute leader, as he almost flung Tim Higgins out of the building.

Really, the boys needed no urging. They were eager to go, and they made the move at once. Followed by Brandt they rushed out, and the city sidewalks had never before felt so grateful under their feet.

"Skip fer keeps!" was Tip's advice, and they proceeded to act upon the idea.

By the time the pursuers reached the door the runaways had gained several feet, and they hastened to increase the distance. Fred felt sure the enemy would not venture to pursue them far where a patrolman must soon be encountered, but he had a lively realization of what could be done with revolvers, if they saw fit to use them.

Luckily, this desperate step was not taken, nor was any pursuit made. The speed of the fugitives seemed to convince the band of the folly of further effort, and when the former reached the first corner, they found that they had the whole field to themselves.

Brandt halted.

"We can take it easy now," he remarked.

"Jemima! but wa'n't that a close call!" Tip exclaimed.

"Touch and go, but mostly go!" returned Fred.

"Anyhow, we'll have 'em pulled in."

"Let's look for an officer."

"No!" decided John Brandt. "It is my wish that no arrests be made!"

"Why?"

"You have an enemy, boy, and, by proper management, he can be detected and punished. A false step may ruin all."

"Who is he?"

"That's what I'll discover, if you'll take my advice."

"Seems to me the best way to find him is to drop on the men he hired to do the job."

"That would ruin all. His creatures would not betray him, and it would merely put him on his guard. I am older and wiser than you; take my advice and you shall not regret it. I'll help you, and we will win, surely."

Fred could not see the logic of the argument used, but he yielded to the other's wishes. It was decided that no arrest should be made then.

Of course Brandt was acting a treacherous part. His desire to avoid pressing hostilities was simply because he feared it would unmask Bonnel Rosecastle upon whom he was shrewd enough to place all blame, and this would interfere with his own schemes.

He had helped Fred with zeal, but only because the lad was necessary to him. If he could feather his own nest from Rosecastle's pocket-book he would abandon Fred; if not, he must fall back upon the latter to accomplish his object.

"Now, boys, go right home, and say nothing about this matter—nothing whatever!" the schemer advised.

"S'pose they tackle us ag'in?" inquired Tip, in a dissatisfied manner.

"Keep away from their quarters, and they will not."

"When shall we see you again?" asked Fred, looking at the man of mystery with curiosity which grew every moment, now that danger was over.

"I'll call around and see you."

Brandt started off, evidently anxious to avoid further conversation, but turned back to give a final warning:

"Be sure not to say a word to any one!"

"All right," Fred replied.

"Go it!" muttered Tip, in disgust. "I don't like you much better than t'other fellers."

"Nor I," Fred agreed.

"Keep away from that ranch, is it? B'jinks! I'm out as a detective fer keeps, an' I'm goin' ter walk in there ag'in!"

"Don't you do it, old man!"

"My wrath is riz," Tip asserted, "an' I want satisfaction. I'd hev them chaps know I'm no football, ter be punched around just as they say. They've had their innin', an' now I want mine, an' I'm bound ter git in a home-run clip over center-field's head."

"You're talking nonsense."

"Be I?"

"Yes; and you want to keep away from that den of unrighteousness. If you don't, the Higgins family will mourn the loss of its brightest star. This is serious, Tip."

"All right," returned the amateur detective, carelessly, but without changing his mind or his intentions.

"Say, I wish we had followed our late ally."

"Can't we do it now?"

"Too late! He's beyond our reach now. Tip, that chap puzzles me! He's done us good service, but I wouldn't bet a penny on him. He's half hawk and half snake—don't like the man!"

"Them's my sentiments, too."

"If I get an eye on him again I mean to have a bill of particulars, ef I can squeeze the facts out of him. I don't understand why he showed up to help us out."

"Don't see no way of guessin', so we'd better go home."

"Come on!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE STRUGGLE ON THE FOOT-BRIDGE.

ON the afternoon of the following day, the Hamlin private carriage paused at the door of their residence. Mary was in the parlor, and had a caller in the person of Montmorency Lestrangle.

"Were you going to drive, Miss Hamlin?" he asked.

"Father and I were going to take a ride northward, out of the city, but only for pleasure," Mary answered.

"Then I will not remain to delay you."

"Why not accompany us, Mr. Lestrangle?"

"I shall be in the way, I fear."

"Oh, certainly not; we should be pleased to have you go."

"Well, by Jove! I can't refuse, you know. If Mr. Hamlin don't object, I'll go."

Mary's face shadowed for a moment. Sensible as she was, she was a victim of the universal complaint which causes people to say amiable and courteous things when they are not sincere, and Montmorency's ready acceptance of the not over-warm invitation had placed her in a situation which bade fair to rob the drive of one-half its pleasure. Lestrangle was well-bred and of good family, but was too pronounced a dude in appearance to make him a desirable companion in a drive with people who did not believe in dudes.

Mary accepted her fate as gracefully as possible, and went to make her preparations. On the way she encountered her father and made the new trouble known.

"Humph!" muttered Phineas. "I hope the horses will not take fright at him and run away. They have seen a good many Anglo-manics, but one right in the carriage may prove too much for their nerves; they may think the gleam of his eye-glasses to be the shot of some demon."

"I'm sorry, for I know you don't like it."

"Bless me! why not? Monty represents blue blood, as well as the reign of the dude; let us take him to our hearts—at least, let me; I command you, daughter, to refrain."

Mary laughed and went to finish her preparations. Her father and his peculiar ways had always amused, but seldom vexed her. He was bluff and outspoken, but never actually rude, and, on the present occasion, Lestrangle seemed likely to receive unusually good treatment; the courtesy due an invited companion would keep back much of Hamlin's sarcasm.

The old gentleman was manly, upright and kind-hearted, in spite of his occasional breaks, and he represented with honor the best part of Murray Hill society—the part which had kept its American backbone, and never succumbed to the alluring habits consequent to the divinity of the dude.

He found many like him among the wealthy people with whom fate had thrown him, but the Anglo-maniac—the aper of English ways, like Rosecastle and Lestrangle—was too numerous to be avoided wholly.

The Hamlins were soon ready for the drive, and, accompanied by Montmorency, they entered the carriage and were whirled away toward the north. Phineas was able to boast of a pair of fine horses, either one being able to trot a mile in 2:35, and he enjoyed riding after them as only a man of spirit can. One grievous fault he had, however, in the eyes of fashion—he would never allow the horses' tails to be docked, and they carried those appendages as Nature, common sense and humanity required.

Straight toward the Harlem went the party; then, crossing that stream, they pursued their way through the annexed district.

The famous trotters cut down the distance easily, and were soon in the rural belt that surrounded the city on the north. Mr. Hamlin grew self-satisfied and high-spirited; the works of Nature, in his opinion, eclipsed those of men, and he always liked an outing among the trees and rocks of the suburbs.

At one point a squirrel became visible on the fence by the road-side, and he drew the revolver he always carried on these trips, but, before he could use it, it was too late.

"Gone!" he commented. "Bad for me, but lucky for the squirrel. Mont, I'll wager you five dollars I can put all of these six bullets into the end of that broken rail which sticks up in the air!"

"Done, baw Jawve!" returned Montmorency, adjusting his eyeglass anew.

Phineas took deliberate aim and fired the required six shots.

"Look for yourself!" he directed.

Lestrangle sprung out and investigated; then his face fell.

"Baw Jawve! you've done it!" he admitted. "Six shots here in a bunch. The money is yours, my dear sir. But this is wonderful shooting, you know; a professional expert could not have done better. I am going to carry this back to New York to show the fellows, you know. My man, will you break this rail in two, so we can retain the necessary part of it?"

The driver took the rail and a sharp blow broke it off, a little over two feet from the end. Montmorency carried the trophy to the carriage, where Hamlin examined it carelessly.

"Not bad work, Mont," he commented. "Could you beat my exhibition?"

"Certainly not, sir. I am a beastly shot, you know; the revolver was never made that I could hold steady. But I fancy I am not bad at using a sword, which is a very gentlemanly amusement. Put the rail where it will not be lost, Mr. Hamlin."

"I will, and"—here the old gentleman balanced it in his hand—"if we are attacked by highwaymen, I can use it as a weapon of defense. It would make an admirable club, and a heavy blow could be dealt with it."

He illustrated by swinging it, and then thrust it under the seat and changed the subject.

They continued their journey for some distance further, and only turned homeward when the afternoon was well spent. It had been a part of the programme to take supper at a road-house by the way, and this plan was adhered to. Reaching the place, they entered and ordered the repast.

Mary went to the parlor, but Hamlin and Le-strange betook themselves to the smoking-room, and were soon enjoying fragrant cigars.

"A fine day, sir," observed the landlord.

"Excellent!" Phineas agreed. "How is trade with you this afternoon?"

"Rather dull, as to numbers, but, for its extent, it has been lively enough. We have just got rid of a party who had an accident on the road, and, getting some bruises and sprains, need our care for awhile. It was the team of a Mr. Ellington Leyden, of New York."

"Leyden! Bless me! I know them well! Any one badly hurt?"

"I think not."

"How did it happen?"

"I ascribe it to carelessness, but there is a gentleman who saw it, and can tell all about the matter. Mr. Hamlin, Mr. Brandt!"

A swarthy man, whose face somehow suggested the idea of a hawk to the observer, came forward a step. He evidently did not belong to the same rank in life as the Murray Hill gentleman, for his black garments were smooth and shiny at the elbows and knees, and he bowed to Hamlin with an air of humility.

"Yes, sir, I saw the affair," he agreed; "and must say it was all due to stupidity. Three teams happened to get abreast, two going one way and one the other; and none of the drivers pulled up, although the road was not wide enough for all. The collision followed."

"There's too much carelessness on the road!"

"Decidedly so."

"Give one-half of the men the reins," pursued Hamlin, with emphasis, "and they make fools of themselves. There is an air prevalent among many horsemen that each and every driver owns the whole highway. Were you driving?"

The stranger smiled, but not with a contented expression.

"Hardly! Shank's mare is the only horse I own."

"Mr. Leyden has a fine team, Mr.—"

"Brandt, sir; John Brandt is my name."

"What?" cried Hamlin, with a start.

"John Brandt."

"Oh! Excuse me; I thought you said John Grant, and I once knew a man of that name. Will you take something, sir?"

"Don't care if I do."

The three drank together amicably, but Hamlin did not seem to desire to prolong the acquaintanceship. Having accommodated Mr. Brandt's stomach, he left the seedy man alone. Brandt had no cause to feel slighted—quite the contrary, in fact—and he walked out of the road-house with a friendly feeling for Mr. Phineas Hamlin. When he reached the door, however, he saw the rich man's carriage standing near, and all ablaze with its glories; while, at the stable door, the hostlers were working over the fine horses. A feeling of bitterness took possession of the observer's mind.

"That's what the rich can have," he thought enviously. "Water would run up-hill for them, and brass turn to gold. I'll wager something there isn't a rich man living but got his first start by robbing some one. Robbers and knaves flourish best in this world, while honest merit is kept in chains like a caged elephant. Curse the luck!"

He grated his teeth in true stage-villain fashion, but there was nothing fictitious about John Brandt's resentment.

He had never been able to accumulate money by fair means or foul—he had tried both—and when he looked and saw the proud feet of a rich man's horses beating a rapid march on the ground, the nightmare of envy trod on his own heart until that organ jumped and quivered in a spasm of anger.

"If I can only get ten thousand out of Bonnel Rosecastle— But I must; I will! Yes; at last I'll fill my pockets, or do some deed that'll make the city tremble."

John Brandt sat down on the piazza and hugged all of his envy and bitterness, and all of his schemes to his breast.

It was nearly dark when he came out, and he remained there for another hour. He was keeping track of the time, however, and finally rose and walked away. Having no turnout of his own he must do the next best thing, and intended to return to New York on the train now due in a short time.

The longer way to the station was by the road; he took the shorter, which was across a field. It was a wild place, rough, rocky and bush-grown, but he knew the way well.

At the widest point he had to cross a rough stream—over a foot-bridge. He reached the place and went out on the bridge. The water below, going past turbulently, attracted his attention, and he slackened his speed and looked down.

What was that?—another footstep on the bridge?

He turned around. He had just time dimly to see another man by his side, and then he received a blow from some heavy weapon which felled him to the bridge.

CHAPTER X.

THE STRANGE WEAPON.

THE blow half-stunned John Brandt. Before it fell he had an indistinct view of a club sweeping through the air, and it fell upon his head with unabated force. He realized that some one entertained murderous designs upon him, and, once down, struggled to rise, but in vain. He seemed almost paralyzed.

Again the club descended. Perhaps its wielder thought this blow, too, took effect on Brandt's head, but the latter's shoulder was the point of reception.

Then the unknown bent; he seized the fallen man; he lifted stoutly; and, in a moment more, Brandt was flung over the rail of the foot-bridge.

He went down helplessly, and fell in the rough water with a great splash. The momentum of the current grasped him as if with human hands, and he was carried down-stream.

The water, however, did more; it restored his paralyzed energies, and he began to fight for life. He was a good swimmer, but the water was rough; one of his arms was almost useless; and he had no clear mental ability to plan then. Before he could gain the bank he had been carried a hundred yards down-stream, but, at last, he crawled up on dry land.

He lay there for some time before he tried to rise, and rubbed his hand across his head more than once. He had received a most severe blow, and the only wonder was that it had not stunned, or killed him outright.

As his mind became clear he realized that his life had been attempted. The assailant had not been a robber, for, with the situation wholly in his grasp, he had made no move toward looking for possible plunder. It had been attempted murder, and no less.

"Whom could it have been? I know but few around here, and have no enemies. By Jupiter! I may get a sight at him, if I move quickly. He may linger to look for my body— Yes, yes; I'll see if I can meet him again. If I do—"

A suggestive pause finished the sentence. He gathered himself up, but only slowly. The second blow given him had been a most vicious sweep, and every movement gave him pain in his shoulder.

"Curse it! I believe some bone is broken; it hurts like the mischief. Never mind! It's the left, and my right arm is as good as ever. Just let me get hold of that scoundrel, and I'll show him John Brandt is better than a dozen dead men now!"

He soon reached the foot-bridge, but there was no sign of the late assailant.

He looked on both sides, and prowled around for some time, but only to arrive at the conclusion that the man had made good his escape.

"I'll go to the stable and question the hostlers."

Acting upon this idea he was again crossing the bridge when his foot struck some movable object. He stooped, picked it up, and found it to be a stout club, between two and three feet long.

"Ha! this is what I was struck with. Probably it flew out of the wielder's hand and, going so many feet away, he overlooked it. Pos-

sibly he thought it fell into the stream. This may furnish a clue."

As he balanced the club in his hand, he could not but realize that he had escaped death most narrowly, and was shrewd enough to suspect that he owed this escape to some nervousness on the part of the assailant.

With his victim helpless at his feet, the unknown had only to continue his blows with precision, and John Brandt would never have seen the club again.

He walked to the stable and paused by a rear window, where the light streamed out brightly. There he examined the club more carefully. It was of clear wood, minus bark, and darkened and patched with small particles of moss by long exposure to storms.

One end, though, was white and fresh.

"It's part of a fence-rail," he muttered, "and has been broken off recently—no doubt for this very purpose. I should think— Hallo! what's this?"

The club was hard and sound except on one side, which had begun to decay, and on the latter part were six small holes. In one of them, as he had discovered, a bullet was plainly visible, and, as he held it to the light, he saw that all were the same.

"A pepper-box filled with bullets!" he exclaimed. "Great Scott! what does that mean?"

He studied on the point, but failed to get any light. He could not understand why this fragment of a rail had been filled up so artistically with lead. Perhaps he might have formed some theory had he not tried to connect the bullets with the assault upon himself, but, trying to do this, was placed all at sea.

Utterly failing to get an idea he concealed the club under his coat and went to interview the hostlers. It had been his intention to tell all about the assault, but, after the latest discovery, he changed his mind without any especial reason.

He questioned the men to learn if they had seen any suspicious character hanging around, but they had not. When he had exhausted all visible resources he abandoned the attempt and once more started for the railway station.

The club he retained, and intended to hold for awhile. At that time he had no idea of complaining to the police. He belonged to that never-do-well part of the world which is always of the opinion that they don't get their rights, and he had a belief that the police would never trouble themselves to work for him.

He was in time to catch the train, and was soon on his way to New York.

Except for a headache he was none the worse for the blow first received, but his shoulder was not coming out of it so well. It was very lame and painful, and he carried his arm in a helpless way.

As he leaned back in the seat he arrived at a conclusion, and that was that he owed the assault to Bonnel Rosecastle.

"The scoundrel means to deceive me," he decided. "He tried to shut Fred Ellis up, so as to get him out of the way, and now he has set an assassin upon me. I was followed here; that's certain. Well, I still live, and I'll show Rosecastle that two can play at his game!"

Reaching home without further adventure, he went to bed at once. His rough experience had not disturbed his nerves, and he slept soundly, but when he awoke in the morning he found his arm very stiff and lame.

He did not try to get around the city much that day. His room, humble and barren as it was, suited him better than any other place, and he wanted to recover from his injury before going out to any extent. He knew he had an enemy who would go to any length to dispose of him, and all his strength and sagacity might be necessary to beat him.

The bullet-laden club he suspended from the gas-fixture, and he took especial pleasure in looking at it.

"That's going to bring some one to grief, anon," he would mutter, "and I think I know who it'll be. Bonnel Rosecastle thinks he can play fast and loose with me, but he don't know his man. I'll show him!"

Late in the afternoon Brandt went out for an airing. He walked as far as Washington Square, and then sat down on a bench and gave himself up to thought. Tramps, servant-girls, baby-carriages and sparrows were around him, all under the august protection of a gray-coated park policeman, but he saw them not; he had too much on his mind.

Finally, he was dimly conscious that a small boy came and sat down beside him, but he did not look that way. The boy turned his back

upon Brandt and buried his face in a book, but, after a pause, a small voice issued from the pages, as it were.

"Mister, don't look this way, but I've got somethin' o' vally ter say ter you!"

It would be useless to caution nine men out of ten in such fashion; they would not be quick-witted enough to profit by the warning; but long experience in dark and wily ways had made John Brandt an uncommon man.

Avoiding the least start, and without turning his head, he quietly replied:

"Speak on, boy."

"You've got enemies in this Park."

"Where?"

"Over by the north side."

"How do you know?"

"I heerd 'em."

"What did they say?"

"They're goin' ter do yer up."

"Ah! How? When?"

"Ter-night, in yer room."

"How will they get at me?"

"They've jest got yer located, it seems, an' now the feller who has been hired ter do the job is goin' ter your lodgin'-house, engage a room, an' pounce on yer ter-night."

"A very nice scheme. How did you know of it?"

"I listened while they talked."

"Who are you, anyhow?"

"Don't yer know my voice?"

"It sounds familiar, but—"

"I'm Tip Higgins!"

"Oho! so you've shown up again. Well, my young friend, you've paid your debt right quick, and I owe you for your service. Tell me all about it. How did you get on to their game?"

"I was just meanderin' around," Tip answered, "when I see you come inter the Park. All at once another man nigh me says, says he, sharp-like: 'That's him!' I looked an' see him an' t'other feller—"

"Did you know them?"

"No."

"Describe them."

"The one who spoke was as big as an alderman; guess he must 'a' weighed two hundred an' fifty. He was kinder old, gray, an'—oh, *meo*, wa'n't he high-toned! His clo'se was fit fer a minister, an' he wore gold enough fer a bank-cashier. He wore sidlers an' a mustache, but had his chin shaved close."

"Bonnell Rosecastle!" thought Brandt.

"T'other feller was a tough—a reg'lar shoulder-hitter, sech as hang around low saloons—"

"Never mind him! What was said?"

"Wal, the high-toned one told the tough you was the duck they wuz after, an' then they laid their plans as aforesaid. The tough was to hire a room next ter yourn ter-night, an' then break in an' do ye up."

"Boy, you've earned my everlasting gratitude, and I won't forget it in you. Those fellows are the biggest knaves in New York, but they won't be able to work their raffle now. Keep on with your reading; I'll show them that John Brandt isn't the clam they take him to be!"

With this the speaker rose and advanced toward the plotters with rapid steps, his face betokening a coming storm.

CHAPTER XI.

TIP ACTS THE SPY.

BRANDT did not need to go far before he saw that one of the men was indeed Bonnell Rosecastle, but, as both were looking the other way, his advance was not discovered until he was beside them, and he spoke roughly:

"You old scoundrell! your game won't work!"

Rosecastle turned quickly, and a startled expression appeared on his face as he recognized the new-comer.

"I'm on to you!" John added.

"What do you mean, sir?" was the haughty reply, as the rich man tried to carry a bold front through the game.

"I mean that this tough won't come into my room to-night, or any other night."

"I am at a loss to know what you mean, sir."

"No, you're not; you know very well. You've hired him to fix me, but he may as well go back to the dive where he hangs out. As for you, you'll never come so near doing for me again as you did last night."

"Do you mean that I have assailed you?"

"You, or your tools."

"It is false!"

"Oh! but I have the piece of fence-rail filled with bullets."

"I don't know what you mean. Your words are not coherent. What am I to understand by such rubbish?"

Brandt was a close and accurate observer, and Rosecastle's manner was now so indicative of sincerity that the former was staggered. If the assault on the foot-bridge was not one planned by Rosecastle, who was responsible for it?

"Anyhow, I'm on to your present game."

"Pray, how do you know of it?"

"It was overheard."

"By you?"

"By a friend of mine."

"He has been telling a lie to you; I assert that nothing of the kind has taken place. Mr. Deegan," turning to the rough, "you can have the job. I want all the old plaster removed, and new put in its place that will stay where it is put. It is singular that masons cannot do work properly."

"I'll do de job bang-up, boss. Put yer finger on de job dat my men has done dat ain't O. K., an' I'll set up de beer fer yer. See?"

The rough tried to carry out Rosecastle's device, but his manner was lacking in all the points common to the respectable American mechanic, and when he had slouched away, Brandt added:

"It won't work, Bonnell!"

"There is a grievous error here. I have done nothing like what you charge me with, and am faithful to our compact. Believe this, for I would not deceive you after making a definite bargain."

"Oh! gammon!"

Brandt was sensible and shrewd, but the result proved that he was not proof against a persuasive tongue. Bonnell Rosecastle found himself in a corner, and set to work with all his eloquence to save himself. If Brandt's nature had been perfectly balanced he would not have succeeded, but, as has before been seen, John was not proof against the gold-fever. That for which he had longed all his life, and longed in vain, had grown the dearer because it had been beyond his reach, and common sense fled when the chink of gold played siren music to his ears.

Rosecastle insisted that he had been wronged, and was going to live up to his agreement, and Brandt wavered.

"But you tried to get rid of young Ellis," he urged.

"When? How?"

"By luring him into the old building over the pawn-shop."

"Never! I don't know what you mean. Explain!"

Brandt explained, and again Rosecastle asserted his innocence. It was working against odds, but his repeated assertions that he stood ready to pay the money carried the day. Brandt put common sense aside, and the compact was renewed.

"But," he added, "you must do the right thing. If I catch you trifling I will sell the secret to Ellis, he to pay me when the money is in his hands."

"Rest easy; you need not go to Ellis. I'll keep my word."

Thus it was left, and when the interview was over, Rosecastle took a Fifth Avenue stage and rode away. Brandt stood looking after him until a small voice sounded beside him, and he saw Tip Higgins.

"How'd yer make out?" Tip inquired.

"You here!" Brandt exclaimed, harshly.

"Why, cert!"

"Take yourself off!"

"Eh?"

"Get out!"

"Say, is that the way you use a feller?"

"I tell you, clear out! I have no time to waste on hoodlums!"

"B'jinks! I opine I've wasted my time on a hoodlum. Be you goin' back on me after I put yer on ter that job?"

"Your story was false."

"Come, now, yer didn't let the big feller pull the wool over yer eyes, did ye?"

"I tell you," cried Brandt, in a rage, "to get out; and if you don't do it, I'll help you with my boot!"

"Now, see here, mister, you've saddled the wrong hoss!" cried Tip, stoutly. "When you set out ter boot me you've got ter get up in the mornin' afore breakfast an' eat a ton o' coal. Say, ain't you got no gratitude? Apply yer boot ter the kid that let yer know of the plot ag'inst yer life, will yer? B'jinks! when a world's prize is offered fer the meanest man livin', I'll back you fer the trophy!"

Brandt had tried to interrupt this flow of

words, but Tip was justly indignant, and he kept on until he had freed his mind.

"You misunderstand me," the man then declared. "My mind was occupied when you interrupted me, and I did not realize who was speaking. Pardon my hasty words, and believe the truth—they were not meant for you!"

Tip listened to this in silence, but without being convinced. John did not speak like one who was acting in sincerity, and the boy was shrewd enough to understand that his own words had frightened Brandt into more prudent conduct. Tip did not try to argue the matter, or re-establish friendly relations; he simply turned sharply around and, heedless of his companion's call, beat a retreat from the Park.

"That critter was sized up right at the beginnin'," he thought, indignantly. "Fred an' I 'lowed that ef he *did* help us he was bad medicine, an' so it's proved. He was as sharp on me as ef I'd tied a tomato-can to his dog's tail. B'jinks! I don't want no more o' him!"

Tip was marching along in such a frame of mind that he did not notice where he was until the window of a pawn-shop suddenly forced itself upon his notice. He looked further, and the sign, with the name, "Mordecai Josephson," became visible.

He stopped short.

"The old ark is still there, an' so is all its secrets. Say, *wouldn't* I like ter get in there an' see what they keep!"

This desire had become a consuming fever with the boy, and, although he was well aware that there was great danger in it, he persisted in the assertion that he was going to enter and act as detective.

Probably he never would have done this but for events which followed this last sight of the place.

Wishing to observe more safely he retreated to a doorway on the side of the street opposite the old building, and, partially concealed by the gathering shadows of evening, looked over the grim front. What secrets were concealed behind those closed blinds? What treasures were there?—the fruit of robbery and crime. What, too, if anything, was there of which he had, as yet, no intimation whatever?

"Hullo!"

One of the closed blinds moved back slowly and gently. Who had moved it Tip could not tell; a human hand, and part of an arm, was visible, but its owner kept well back out of sight.

Tip watched eagerly. Even in this matter there was a degree of cunning caution which told of secrets to conceal, and he wondered greatly what was going on there.

Shortly after he saw some one moving about the room. There was no light inside; but the room was so situated as to get the benefit of the last light of day; and though he could not recognize any one, he could see the figure of the man, and, in a general way, distinguish his movements.

The unknown soon went to a mirror and began his toilet, but it was one out of the ordinary course of events. He affixed a wig to his head, and then adjusted a false beard. By that time he had made a radical change in his appearance, and it was not hard to surmise the reason.

"More villainy afoot!" Tip thought. "What *don't* they do inside there? I'll watch an' see him when he comes out."

He waited, but did not see anything. After a short time the window was reclosed, but, though he delayed until his stomach reproached him, Tip saw no one come out.

"I'll go home an' feed up," he decided, "but I ain't done here. That's a den o' rascals, an' I'm the lad ter bring 'em ter book. Ef sech a thing is possible, I'm goin' ter slide inter that old ark ter-night an' look it over. Mebbe I'll git awfully done up, but—I'll risk it!"

CHAPTER XII.

FRED STRIKES A TRAIL.

"TAKE this note, go to Phineas Hamlin's house, and wait for an answer!"

"Yes, sir."

"Lose no time, but don't return without the answer."

"Very well, sir."

The speakers were G. Percy Rosecastle and Fifth Avenue Fred. The latter received the note from Percy, and then proceeded to perform the errand. He was soon at the other house, and his ring brought the servant into view.

"Miss Hamlin in?" Fred inquired.

"No; gone out; but she's expected back every minute."

"Then I'll wait. This letter is for her, and I'm to hold on for an answer."

"I'll see she gets it as soon as she comes."

Fred went to the kitchen, and was entertained with all of the loquacity common to servants. This occasion, however, was not to be one of trivial consequence; he had for some time been on the verge of a discovery, and it was about to meet him now.

"Has Mr. Percy any more news about the robbery?" asked the chambermaid.

"What robbery?"

"Why, the diamonds."

"Don't know what you mean."

"Why, haven't you heard that the ladies were robbed when out with your master?"

"No."

"Well, they were, and quite a loss it was, too."

"Illigant diamonds, too!" quoth the cook.

"Never heard of it," declared Fred.

"Well, you see Percy and a friend of his, and Mary Hamlin and her cousin, Nettie Reynolds, went to ride, and then they stopped at a *café* and had dinner; and when they got back, both girls had been robbed. Mary lost a pin, and Nettie a pin, a bracelet and a pair of earrings."

Fred regarded the talkative servant in silence, but not by any means with indifference. He remembered the jewels exhibited by the captain of the band to "Dan," and the assertion of the former that he had taken them from two "silly girls" in a bold and hazardous way.

It was a singular coincidence, if no more.

"Illigant diamonds, too!" repeated the cook.

"And they haven't been found?" Fred asked.

"No."

"Have they any idea who took them?"

"No; it's a great mystery."

"A bold job, too."

"They all declare that no stranger was near them, as far as they noticed, and how them diamonds could have been swiped I don't see."

"They were just *illigant*!" lamented the cook.

"Tell me all about it."

The story was well-known in the kitchen, and Fred received an account about as circumstantial and accurate as the principals to the adventure could have given. Much stress was given to the fact that all of the theorizing of the young people had failed to develop any clew, and they were wholly at loss to know how the jewels had gone, or where they were.

For the second time Fred listened to an inventory of the articles lost, and then his suspicion became a conviction—he had seen the diamonds since they were stolen, and, even then, the captain of the band of thieves could explain the whole mystery.

It was an odd discovery, but he hardly knew what to do about it. He had promised John Brandt not to mention the adventure in the old house, and, after so much delay, he was reluctant to speak of it, anyhow.

Would he not be blamed for waiting so long?

"Just as like as not the Honorable G. Percy would be as mad as a wet hen, especially if a move now should prove to be too late. Still, my duty is plain, and I'm going to tell Phineas Hamlin."

By the time he arrived at that conclusion Mary returned from her trip, and Fred went upstairs to deliver the note. He went, too, with the intention of seeing Mr. Hamlin, but fate defeated his purpose.

When he reached the hall Hamlin was just going out hastily, to go somewhere in the carriage which had brought Mary home. Fred accosted him.

"Mr. Hamlin, can I speak with you—"

"Some other time! I can't stop now!"

Something had ruffled Phineas's temper, and, though he did not speak with actual rudeness, he disposed of G. Percy Rosecastle's valet without ceremony. Fred took the rebuff philosophically, and, as Phineas went away, proceeded to wait for Mary's reply to the note.

He was thus occupied when an elderly lady came down the stairs and, seeing the valet, stopped. This was Miss Harriet Hamlin, sister of Phineas, who has been mentioned casually in these pages previously.

"Are you the messenger from Mr. Rosecastle?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," was the answer.

"And your name is—?"

"Fred Ellis, ma'am."

"I remember hearing that name years ago."

"Don't suppose your father was captain of a canal-boat?"

"But he was, though!" Fred exclaimed.

"Not Captain Lebanon Ellis?"

"The very same!"

"How singular! Why, I, with friends, made

a journey on the canal some fifteen years since, and your father was the captain. I remember him well. He was a hearty, whole-souled man, and we used to like to talk with him. He often talked of his only child, then an infant, and I remember the name very well. He worked, and thought, and even dreamed—yes, did *all* for 'Fred'!"

"Be died soon after that," remarked Fred, soberly.

"How does it happen you are reduced in circumstances so as to be a servant?"

"My father left me only a few dollars—just enough to pay my way until I was old enough to earn my own living. Since I was twelve I've had to look out for Number One, all alone."

"That is singular! What became of the twenty thousand dollars in bonds that Captain Ellis had?"

"Guess you've got two cases mixed up, ma'am; he didn't leave one-twentieth part of twenty thousand."

"But he told me that, after fifty years of hard labor and careful saving, he had the sum mentioned; that it was in bonds, and deposited for safe keeping with a wealthy gentleman who took an interest in him."

"Never heard of it before, ma'am."

"I'm sure he told me so."

Fred wavered. Several times in years past he had heard all friends of his deceased father express wonder that the latter had left so little money. No one had ever suspected Captain Ellis of being a spendthrift, and it had been thought that he would leave more money than he did. These expressions of wonder, however, had been passing comments, for the speakers did not pretend to know whether Ellis had put anything by or not.

"I remember, too," Miss Hamlin added, thoughtfully, "that your father said the rich man who held his twenty thousand dollars' worth of bonds in trust was one who had fallen into the canal years before, and whose life Ellis then saved."

"Well, I'd like to see those bonds now."

"Was there no receipt among your father's papers, showing that such bonds were held in trust?"

"I was only an infant when he died myself, but I never heard of any bonds."

"Then you have been wronged out of them!" Miss Hamlin declared.

Fred shook his head slowly.

"Very likely that man is still living," she pursued, "and watching you toil for a living. When you look at him unsuspiciously, he must regard you with fear, always dreading lest you discover his treachery; perhaps plotting how he can get you out of the way if you get an inkling of the truth. Dark deeds are done in New York, and he might decoy you away—imprison you, or have you cast into one of the merciless rivers that lave the sides of our island city."

Miss Hamlin was imaginative and romantic, and she was giving her fancy full sway now, but she succeeded in impressing Fred deeply.

He had been decoyed away and imprisoned! By whom? For what purpose? Could it be that some man had first robbed, and, now, sought to do him violence?

"Guess I'll have to look into this!" he declared.

"Do so, by all means."

"I'm greatly obliged, ma'am, for your information."

"You are quite welcome, and if you require any aid, come to me. Honest Captain Ellis was too good a man for his son to be wronged. Investigate among your father's old friends, and if any money is needed, come right to me and state your needs."

This was said with such unaffected kindness that Fred thanked Miss Hamlin warmly. He did not have any idea that he would ever have reason to ask her aid, but he determined to come to her if matters should develop in that way.

A servant now brought the note from Mary, and Fred took it and started toward home. On the way he speculated not a little on what he had heard, and the mystery of his adventure in the old building over the pawn-shop grew more and more significant, but he was naturally so practical that he would not let his mind have too much scope.

"I don't believe I'm a millionaire, fix it as you may!" he decided. "I'll just see Aunt Sally Gregg, who knew my father so well, but she will probably explode the bubble. It won't do any great harm to ask Percy a question or two about his sending me on that errand to the roost of the gang."

When Fred reached the Rosecastle house,

Percy was lounging in his own room. One of the doors was ajar—a door which connected with a room devoted to general use, and Bonnel Rosecastle was lying down there.

He heard Fred come in, but gave no particular heed to the fact until, after Percy had read the letter, the valet came to the point and asked:

"Mr. Rosecastle, may I ask you a question?"

"Go on!"

"Who were the folks you sent me among, night before last?"

Bonnel started, and, raising his head, listened anxiously for the reply.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NIGHT OF PERIL.

Percy looked at Fifth Avenue Fred with languid interest.

"That reminds me," he observed, "that you have failed to bring any answer."

"As I told you the next morning, I didn't find Mr. Dexter," Fred answered.

"He will answer by mail, I dare say."

"Do you know him well?" Fred continued.

"Casually."

"What kind of people are they at that house?"

"Don't know; I was never there."

"Was the business important that you sent me on?"

Percy made an impatient gesture.

"I told you the next morning that your failure was of no moment. You can go!"

"One word, sir. I got into trouble by going there."

"Have you been disgracing yourself?"

"The shoe is on the other foot. When I arrived there I was politely ushered into a room, and then the door was locked on me, and I only escaped by humping myself in the liveliest way possible. The house is a den of thieves and cut-throats!"

"Really, this is nothing to me," Percy asserted.

"Are you sure you sent me, that night, on your business? Or was it for some one else?"

Bonnel Rosecastle, listening to every word, sprung to his feet and was on the point of rushing in to stop this dangerous conversation peremptorily, at once, but Percy, having been ordered by his father, previously, to conceal the fact that he, not Percy, was the cause of Fred having been sent, had also taken the alarm, though he did not know the secret of the affair; and his answer checked the elder man.

"Boy, you may not mean it, but you are grossly impertinent. The errand I sent you upon was most trivial, and if you had trouble I am sorry. Yet, it was no fault of mine, for I did not know that you would meet lawless persons, and I beg that you will refer to it no more. You make me nervous with your beastly talk. Go!"

Percy had worked himself into a passion, and his breath, coming from his little lungs, rasped upon his little voice until the latter was like a squeaking saw.

Fred bowed with grave politeness.

"Very well, sir; please excuse my outrageous loquacity and reprehensible familiarity."

He withdrew, feeling that his long words had saved him from utter defeat, but not any more in love with the Rosecastle family. He had not succeeded in cornering Percy sufficiently to get a direct answer to his question as to whether Percy had been fully responsible for the mysterious errand, but he believed he had detected an evasion.

"The little chap was tremendously wrought up over something," Fred thought, "and I begin to think it may be worth my while to look into his affairs. He can't be the one that wronged my father—if any one did—but he may be agent for whoever did. Bonnel is mean enough for that or any other deed!"

It had been Fred's intention to visit Aunt Sally Gregg, the old woman who, of all others, knew the most about Captain Lebanon Ellis, but he finally decided to defer that call. He did not know whether Percy would need him again during the evening, and he would not venture to request leave of absence.

Shortly after, Montmorency LeStrange called upon young Rosecastle. Fred knew the former well by sight, though he had never been favored with that august person's acquaintance, and he now chuckled grimly.

"Won't the two dear chappies have a jolly time!" he commented. "Eye-glasses will be at a premium, and they'll talk about the girls, sunflowers, butterflies and cigarettes. Oh, they are howling swells, and Father Knickerbocker would just fall down and worship it!" he could see the

nondescripts now on his farm. Go it, ye dudes, and may your shadows never grow less—if they do, a darning-needle would give you points and win on flesh!”

There was no call for the valet during the evening, and, at the usual hour, he retired to his sleeping-room. This was on the upper floor.

He entered, closed the door and began to undress. While thus occupied he had a sudden impulse, and, for the first time since he came to the house, he determined to lock the door. Just why he did it he could not have told, but he felt that he would be better off locked in, with others locked out.

He took hold of the key and gave it a turn. It moved easily for a while and then stopped short. He was not certain whether the bolt had slipped into place—if so, it had moved easily and without noise—but, to make sure, he turned the knob and pulled.

The door opened readily.

He then tried to turn the key again, but without success; the bolt was fast.

“Well, for a high-toned ranch this door isn’t kept in the best of condition,” he commented.

He looked closer at the troublesome point, thinking that rust might have gathered around the metal, and then discovered another obstacle. He used his fingers upon it, but, making a failure, brought out his pocket-knife and used the point. With this he drew out from between the bolt and the fixed part of the lock a small, wedge-shaped piece of wood, which dropped to the floor.

After that the bolt moved easily, and there was no trouble about locking the door.

Stooping, he picked up the tiny wooden wedge and carried it to the light. Then he made a fresh discovery. On one side, the wedge was white and clean, while on the other—that side which had been visible when it was in the door—it was dark, some black substance having been smeared upon it.

An indentation on one side, where it had touched the end of the bolt, showed that some one had deliberately forced the wedge into the narrow aperture. As there were no children in the house, it seemed certain that it had been done for the purpose of making it impossible to lock the door.

“Looks queer!” Fred commented.

Going again to the door he knelt on the threshold and began to search very carefully on the floor. He was not long in finding a few minute shavings of wood, not large enough to be noticed by a casual gaze, but, obviously, wafer-like scraps cut from some larger object.

Fred took them into his room, put them on the table beside the wedge, and then sat down and nodded sharply.

“A nice little game! Mr. Somebody laid his plot and made the wedge; then he came up to slip it in beside the bolt and make the door unlockable. The wedge was a hair too large, so he shaved off a bit. He drove it in. Then he noticed that the whiteness of the wood made it an object too easily seen, and he smeared it with some dark stuff. The work was done, and the door would not lock. Who was this Mr. Somebody, and what was his object?”

The valet turned his gaze toward the bed.

“The object isn’t hard to guess at. If I hadn’t taken my sudden freak to lock the door, I should have had a visitor to-night!”

He shivered a little as he arrived at this conclusion. Perhaps the plot was to kill him.

“Of all the tough gangs I ever struck, this is the worst!” he continued. “I think my health demands that I throw up my job as dude-duster, and skip for humbler but more honest quarters. To-night, I’ll lock my door—”

He paused, hesitated, and added:

“No, by jinks! I will not lock it, but I’ll keep half-awake and nab the chap who has designs on me!”

Having formed this scheme his spirits rose, and he proceeded to carry out the plan. He undressed as usual, deviating in no particular from his usual habit; and, as usual, he left the door unlocked.

When all was done he formed a dummy in the bed, making a roll up and down which looked very much like a prostrate person, and he knew of old that, when the moon was in the quarter where it now was, it shone in through the window after a certain time, casting its light on the lower half of the bed.

“Guess it’ll get around so as to shine in at about one o’clock, to-night,” he decided, after some study. “If Mr. Somebody comes at that hour he will be impressed by the up-rising feet and legs of my dummy, while I may yet get a look at him.”

Very well satisfied with his work, he put out the gas, lay down on the floor back of the bed and awaited developments.

For an hour he would have no cause to expect company, but when the clock struck twelve in a church within hearing, he partially rose and, thereafter, awaited with closest attention.

The next hour brought no signs, and he judged that it must be half-past one when, without any audible sound, the door opened. Then followed a long pause.

Fred had been practicing to imitate the breathing of a sleeper, and he did his best now, but without the strongest faith in his ability. He was growing more doubtful when, with soft steps, some one entered the room.

The watcher expected to see him advance to the bed, but that was not his objective point. He turned to the left, took a few steps, and brought himself full into the moonlight.

Then Fred held his breath in excited expectancy and apprehension.

The intruder was Bonnel Rosecastle!

Straight on the latter went until he reached the wall.

“He’s going to light the gas!” Fred thought. “By jinks! won’t I be in a peck of danger then! He’ll do me up, sure!”

Once more Fred was wrong. Rosecastle paused for a moment by the wall; then he turned and, with steps as light as before, retreated to the entrance. Reaching it, he went out silently and closed the door after him.

The watcher was surprised, but scarcely relieved. He thought there had been some mis-carriage in the plan, and that Bonnel would soon return. He waited, but Bonnel came not. He listened, but the seconds passed away without sounds of any one moving.

Suddenly Fred raised his head higher. There was a strong smell of gas in the room; something he had never before noticed.

After a few moments he had an idea, and, rising, he crossed the floor quickly but lightly.

The full force of the gas was turned on!

The scheme became apparent at once, and one turn of his fingers shut off the deadly air.

“Bonnel, you’re a corker!” the boy commented, “and not by any means a fool. Wanted me to be found dead in bed in the morning, didn’t you, and have it said that I turned on the gas and went out of life like a hayseed from Way-back? Bonnel, your plan was all right, but your name is Dennis, this time!”

Lowering the window to let off the now impure air Fred sat down and remained thoughtful and motionless for nearly half an hour. Important matters were on his mind, and he was trying to see his way clear.

Finally, he rose, locked the door and went to bed.

He had no further fear, for, even if Rosecastle came back, he could not get in; so, succumbing to weariness, he slept soundly the rest of the night.

He awoke in the morning, safe and sound. It had been his original intention to leave before the family were astir, but he decided not to let Bonnel know that his plan had been discovered. By assuming innocence, the man might think he owed his defeat to chance, or his own carelessness.

Accordingly, when he rose Fred acted just the same as usual, but, knowing Rosecastle’s habits well, so laid his own plans that, at an early hour, he squarely met his enemy in the hall.

The valet bowed, and very politely said: “Good-morning, sir; a very fine morning, sir!”

CHAPTER XIV.

TIP HIGGINS, TATTERED AND TORN!

THE respectful greeting was thrown away. Rosecastle stood still, answering not a word, and guilt was plainly expressed in his face. He had been so sure of his plan that it was like seeing one from the grave.

Fred Ellis, alive and well! The rich man’s heart began to thump like a drum, and he might have done almost any rash thing, but it was not a part of Fred’s plan to act so as to betray the fact that he was cognizant of the attempt on his life.

He passed quietly on, leaving Rosecastle standing where he was.

“I’ve given the old gent a big scare, just to get him prepared for the wrath to come. He looks like a carved hitching-post, but I don’t care to stand around and let his arm get to working. I’ll avoid him hereafter.”

Percy soon rung, and Fred went to him and gave his aid as usual. The young man’s languid, unconcerned air convinced the valet that he had not been in the game.

Shortly after, the letter-carrier brought a note, which Fred opened and read with interest.

“MISTER F. L. ELLIS:—Cum down and see me. I hav bin in the old howse on detectiv bisnis and got pritty wal chawed upp. Cum w’en you kan. T. HIGGINS.”

Somewhat alarmed by this vague announcement, Fred put on his hat and left at once. He was not certain he should return again. The Elevated Road took him in haste to his young friend, but, reaching him, the valet paused and looked in surprise at a dust-covered, torn object purporting to be Tip.

“This is all that’s left of me!” the latter mournfully remarked.

Fifth Avenue Fred gazed at his companion with a mixture of anxiety and amusement. Tip did not seem to be severely injured, battered and torn though he was, and his appearance was certainly absurd and comical.

“Say, have you run against a locomotive?” demanded the valet.

“Only a sassage-cutter!” Tip gravely replied.

“You’re about ready for market, ain’t you?”

“Add a little dog to me, an’ I’m a prime sassage.”

“What in blazes has happened?”

“I fell down a man-trap. See the tatters an’ tears in my raiment? See the dust an’ cobwebs onter me? Them is the results of my tumble, an’ I must say I fell fast.”

“Then the enemy hasn’t had hold of you?”

“Not yet.”

“What have you found out?”

“Nothin’, except that the old buildin’ has other occupants than rats an’ ghosts. I’ve seen both o’ the last, an’ heerd the more dangerous critters. Yes, sirree,” added Tip, with emphasis; “I’ve seen an’ heerd wonders, but jest w’ot is there I can’t say.”

“You’ve had a good deal of experience not to make any discoveries.”

“No diskiveries! Say, I’ve found out enough ter fill my stomach fer a month, ef diskiveries was victuals.”

“Tell me all about it,” Fred urged.

“It all come o’ disobeyin’ orders,” Tip confessed, sheepishly. “You are sorter the captain, an’ you tol’ me not to go nigh them, but in I went. Notice the dust an’ rents on me. I’ve carefully saved both so you kin see w’ot I’ve suffered—an’ no hopes of a pension!”

“Any hope of your masculine parent taking a strap to you?”

“He would ef I was ter show up, but I’m sort o’ livin’ in exile. This mornin’ I had a peccoliar pain under the lower buttons o’ whar my jacket would be ef I owned one, so’t I couldn’t rise an’ dress fer breakfast. How’s things where you live?”

Tip broke off suddenly to ask the question, and looked at Fred with an air more serious and earnest.

“I don’t live there any more.”

“You ain’t got fired?”

“I’ve graduated! This morning I put on my best patent-leathers and walked out to stay, as far as duties as valet are concerned. If I go back, it’ll be because I want to get a cinch on Bonnel R.”

“How’s that?”

“Tell your story first.”

“No! I jest want ter see ef yourn will hinge on mine at all. I kind o’ hev an idee the two may worm in tergether, like the threads in a weaver’s cloth.”

Fred rapidly told the story, making it plain that if it had not been for his sudden impulse to lock his door, Bonnel Rosecastle would have had the desired chance to turn on the gas when the valet was asleep, and leave him to breathe the deadly air.

“You had a close scratch of it,” Tip agreed, “but I can’t say I’m s’prised. I heerd enough in our old ark over the pawnshop ter set my wits ter pullin’ up grass.”

“Tell me all about it.”

“Wal, you see I went ter that place bound ter prove that I wuz born fer a great detective, or loosen the rubber soles on my tennis-shoes in tryin’. I had looked it over from the outside with a kritikel eye, an’ believed I seen a chance ter git in on the sly. Right next to it wuz a smaller buildin’ used fer a house, which had a flat roof, an’ come up nigh a side winder of the ark.”

“I found out who lived in that house, made the acquaintance of a boy who lived there, an’ gi’n him eleven cents, ten marbles, a whistle an’ a jack-knife ter let me sleep on his roof fer a week. It was a reckless expendishure o’ money, an’ he jumped at the chance.”

“Last night he let me in on the sly, unbe-

known to his parients, an' I went up ter my quarters.

"I laid down an' waited until things got quiet fer the night, an' then I riz up, seized holt of a water-spout an' climbed up some several ten feet. This brought me ter the winder aforesaid, an' I was charmed ter find it unfastened. I shoved 'er up an' entered.

"I wuz now in the lair o' the seven-horned beast, ez the cirkis-man says, an' I aimed ter be keerful; but you could 'a' buried an old white hoss in the stillness, an' kivered him up a rod deep; so I set up ter explore.

"Jest now I won't tire yer with a long description o' my movements, but this here is the summary: I found a bull's-eye lantern, an' with this I went from room ter room, lookin' inter things."

"Say, do you aim to be a detective?" Fred asked.

"That's my perfession now," Tip replied, with dignity.

"You may thank your lucky stars you're not an angel! You went roaming around there with a glim, liable to be caught any minute—"

"I only let the light show when I needed it."

"All the same."

"But I *didn't* git ketched."

"All right. What did you see?"

"Plunder! Things the gang had took in an' slung by fer a time. One room was full of it; sort of an annex ter the pawnshop, I guess. In another room I found wigs, false beards, different kinds o' clothes, an' some other things which, I figger it, was ter color their faces an' hands w'en they was goin' out fer biz."

"Just so! Proceed!"

"All would 'a' been wal," continued Tip, less proudly, "but I run on ter two o' the gang an' stopped ter listen. Will yer b'lieve it?—they was talkin' erbout you an' me, an' let on that they was skeered out o' their silk socks fer fear we would give 'em away. Hi! they didn't suspect I was crouchin' behind a door, then, an' takin' it all in."

"Proceed, general!"

"One o' them finally axed the other who we was, an' this is about what t'other said: He 'lowed he didn't know our names, but said that 'Dan' did; said one on us worked fer a rich man who wuz afraid on him, an' had made up his mind ter git the boy out o' the way; an' that it was him who hired Dan ter gobble us."

"Did they say that?"

"Yes. An' they said, more'n that, that the rich man would be at the work ag'in. The well-posted feller stated in plain words that the rich man was dead afraid o' his boy enemy."

"I suspect there was a good deal of guess-work in all this."

"Anyhow, he said it was somethin' way-back, an' that your boss had never known he had cause ter fear yer until lately. How'd he know that? if it's true."

Fred shook his head.

"Proceed, comrade!"

"Then they talked a long while about their captain, an' was as curious erbout him as you please. Nobody knows his name, or how he looks, but Dan. They do know, though, that he's one o' the high-daddies who, bein' short o' funds, gits his spendin'-money by runnin' the gang, plannin' their principal breaks, an' pocketin' the ducats."

"Funny about the captain. You know I told you that, when we lay under the tables and heard him talk, there was something familiar about his voice. I feel sure I've heard it in the past, somewhere, and if I could hear the man speak in his proper character, I'd know him, sure!"

"I seen his face dimly by the Academy of Music, an' ef I git sight o' him ag'in, I shall know him. But that ain't ter the p'int. I b'lieve I see the way clear fer you an' me ter gobble this piratikel captain!"

CHAPTER XV.

A CALL FOR HELP.

FRED looked at Tip doubtfully.

"Got another wild scheme in mind?" he demanded.

"Not a bit of it!" Tip declared. "I made out from their talk that a big break was on the hooks, an' Dan was expected there ter give them some orders, after which he was goin' ter call on the captain—the cap'n's got a roomsom'ers where he an' Dan meet—an' the exact time o' the break was ter be settled. Now, w'ot's ter prevent our gobblin' both on 'em?"

"D'ye suppose a mouse could swallow a mountain?"

"But we'd take in the perleece."

"We'll think of it," Fred answered.

"We kin make our name as detectives," Tip urged.

"Come off, T. Higgins! Boys don't want to get such ideas into their heads; they're sure to come to grief, and do you suppose the police would take the right view of it? No; they would say the boys were the criminals and jug them."

"I ain't tol' you how I got shook up so," Tim went on, unabashed by this practical talk. "You see, I was up on the highest floor, then, where things ain't finished off so much as they might be. I didn't dare show the light from the bull's-eye, an' was crawlin' along by guess when I took a tumble. Down I went in between two walls, inter a hole left by the carpenters because they couldn't use that corner; an' dust, lime an' nails—wal, now! ef you want any proof, look at me!"

The signs of dilapidation bore evidence to the speaker's veracity, and with eloquence not to be surpassed.

"I brought up at last, an' then *didn't* I hev a climb! I could only rise by puttin' my back against one wall an' my feet ag'in another, an' that's how I got more nail-wounds, more mortar, an' more dust. Finally, I got out, an' then I left the buildin' in a hurry. I don't want no more of it, b'jinks! but I do want to foller Dan at eight o'clock this evenin', w'en he goes ter see the captain."

"Maybe we'll do it, but, first of all, I'm off to interview one Aunt Sally Gregg. Come with me, and on the way I'll tell you what is up."

Tip washed himself and discarded his tattered clothing, and then they started on the journey. While walking, Fred made the situation as clear as possible.

He still found it hard to believe that he had ever possessed any money to lose, but Miss Harriet Hamlin's assertions were too positive to be disregarded wholly.

Aunt Sally Gregg was soon found. She was a bright-eyed, sharp-featured woman of about seventy years. Fred had met her only twice since he could remember, but he easily recalled how fluently she had talked about Captain Lebanon Ellis and his affairs.

After some preliminary talk he brought up the matter nearest his heart, and the old lady was not reluctant to give it attention.

"Many's the time I went by canal in your father's boat," she averred.

"He was at it a good while."

"And a right hard-workin' man."

"He didn't save much money, though."

"What *did* he do with it?"

"I don't know; do you?"

"No. Cap'n Ellis had the name of bein' a generous man, but it was in little things—agreeable things to eat and drink on the trip. He wore very plain clothes; was a temperate man; worked all the time, and never threw away money on anybody else. How he could slave all his life and have so little I don't comprehend!"

Mrs. Gregg's expression indicated even more perplexity than her words.

"Well, I never saw it," Fred remarked.

"It was only a few months before he died that I took a trip with him. He was speakin' of his wife, your mother, who had died just before. 'I have only my boy now,' says the captain, 'and if I should die he wouldn't have a relation alive. However,' says he, 'if I *should* die, there'll be enough to rear Fred in a way fit for a rich man's son. I wear old clothes,' says he, 'but I'm not half a beggar.' Of course," Aunt Sally pursued, "I didn't ask how much he had, but I made a guess then and said to myself, 'I'll bet he's got ten thousand dollars!'"

"Yet he left less than one thousand."

"So I heard."

"Do you suppose any of it got away from me?"

"I don't know enough about the cap'n's affairs to say, but I remember a talk I had with the administrator—as honest a man as ever lived—and he said that all of his investigation had failed to find any more."

"Suppose my father put property into somebody's hands to keep?"

"Then the receipt would have been found—I suppose."

"What if he had neglected to take any?"

"Then the holder stole it all. Why do you ask? Have you reason to suspect anything of the kind?"

"I don't know. One question more: Do you know of my father saving any one from drownin' in the canal?"

"Bless me! he told me he had saved twenty persons."

"But this was a rich man."

"A good many of them may hev been rich. I remember one man in particular; he took a ride on the boat the same night I was there, once. He was terrible high-toned, but was quite friendly with Cap'n Ellis. They said they had known each other when boys, an' had always kept up the acquaintance. Your father told me, private, that the man was the honestest person in New York, though I remember I didn't like his face. He was one your father had saved from drownin', years before."

Fred did not fail to see the similarity between this case and the one referred to by Miss Harriet Hamlin.

"You don't remember who this man was, do you?"

"Do I! The name was too odd to be forgotten. It was Bonnel Rosecastle!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"My father knew him when they were boys, and saved his life? and he said Rosecastle was the most honest man in New York?"

"Yes. I could see that Rosecastle was not over-and-above cordial, and gave plain evidence that he felt himself far better than the cap'n, but the cap'n wa'n't the most discernin' man alive. He was just stuck on Bonnel Rosecastle. Who the latter was I don't know; I never see or heard of him sence."

Fifth Avenue Fred had later news, but he did not give it to Aunt Sally. He had learned all she could tell, and the best thing for him to do was to keep his secrets until he told them to some one who could help him.

"Wild as the idea at first seems, I now believe that Rosecastle stole some of my money," he remarked, to Tip, as they went away. "I'm going to see a lawyer about it, and ask if I have any case; but not to-day. I'm curious to know more about that man 'Dan,' first. Rosecastle sent me to Dan to be gobbled up, you know; maybe Dan could tell something of value to me. We'll wait until evening, follow Dan, see where he goes, and then notify the police and have him and the masked captain arrested."

Acting according to this plan, Fred remained with Tip all day. What Percy would think of his absence he did not know or care: he did not intend to give the elder Rosecastle another chance to do him injury.

At the appointed hour the two boys were on hand to follow Dan, and he did not tire their patience. He started northward, and they fell in behind him and, using all the skill they could command, proceeded to track him to "the captain's" lair.

"Do you s'pose they'll pay the reward ter boy detectives?" asked Tip, hungrily.

"My beloved comrade, don't call me any such name!" Fred protested. "I'm not risking my reputation and liberty for any shadowy honor. Let's be private citizens, and run no risks."

"I am goin' ter be a detective!"

"Wade in, T. Higgins, but you'll come ter grief."

It was no time to argue the matter, for it required all their skill to follow Dan as he ought to be followed to insure success. They were still on the trail when the keen-eyed Tip suddenly grasped his companion's arm.

"Look up the street!"

"Where?"

"See anybody familiar comin' this way?"

"Hal it's John Brandt!"

"Correck fer keeps! He an' Dan are goin' ter meet—wonder ef Brandt will know him?"

"Dan is stopping. Hallo! he rings the bell; he must be at the end of his journey. By Jinks! we've hived him!"

"Look at Brandt!"

Dan had not seen the hawk-faced man, nor had the latter seen Dan until the last moment; but when he did, he sprang forward and seized the member of the band.

"Help!" John shouted. "This way, officer! Police! police! Arrest this man!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STRANGELY-MARKED RAIL REAPPEARS.

FRED and Tip saw their plan to get the credit of capturing Dan nipped in the bud, but as the former, at least, was not after glory, he was not sorry to see John Brandt thus come to their aid. Brandt's triumph, however, was of short duration; his left arm was still almost helpless, and in Dan he had found an opponent who would have been more than his match at any time.

Dan now swung out his clinched hand in a neat blow, and Brandt fell helplessly to the sidewalk.

Another moment and the member of the band had dodged into the house and locked the door after him.

A patrolman was near at hand, but, though he used due haste, he was not soon enough to take a hand in the affray. Brandt scrambled clumsily to his feet, and looked around in a bewildered way.

"What's all this row about?" the patrolman demanded.

"Arrest that scoundrel!" John gasped.

"What has he done?"

"He is one of a gang of robbers."

"Who has he robbed?"

"Everybody! Couldn't you see by his looks that he was a robber?"

"My eyes ain't as sharp as that."

"You'd have seen it if you had attended to business."

The officer regarded Brandt sharply, and noticed a peculiar mixture of wildness, bewilderment and vacancy in his expression, and this, together with his absurd statements, led the city guardian to a conclusion.

"I reckon you are off your base," he declared, bluntly.

"Are you going to make the arrest?"

"Not on your statement, until I know you are in your right mind."

"Here are other witnesses!" asserted a new speaker, and Fifth Avenue Fred pushed forward into view. "My friend, Higgins, and I are prepared to say that Mr. Brandt is right. That man belongs to a band of robbers, and he ought to be nabbed before he escapes."

"And who are you?"

"Frederick L. Ellis."

"What do you know about the case?"

The officer was still inclined to be skeptical, but the combined persuasion of the three finally convinced him. Declaring that he would have Dan if he had to break in the door to get him, he rung the bell violently. It was answered without undue delay, and a stolid-looking German woman appeared.

"We want the man who just came in here!" explained the patrolman, quickly.

"I have not seen any man here."

"Don't deny it—"

"Indeed, I know nothing about it, but you can look if you wish. No man belongs here but is at work elsewhere, and if any one came in, he's an intruder. What has he done, sir?"

"Bet yer a dollar Dan has skipped!" Tip whispered, addressing Fred.

The prediction proved correct. Dan was not found, nor any other persons except the woman, and no evidence was discovered that, as had been asserted, the captain of the band had a room there.

Tip had imagined a place where could be seen plain evidence that the redoubtable leader was in the habit of changing his personal appearance by means of disguise, but he was doomed to disappointment.

Failing to get men or evidence, the officer evinced a disposition to drop the case, and no one objected.

John Brandt had relapsed into a moody silence, and scarcely commented on the failure. Fred and Tip took charge of him and led him to Union Square, where they found seats together.

"How did you happen to find Dan?" Fred then asked.

"I was looking for some member of the gang, and I found him! There is a gigantic plot against me, and I must be up and stirring to beat them. I am working against odds, for I have not been myself since I got this blow from the club."

He put his hand to his head, and the boys exchanged glances.

"What are you going to do now?" inquired Fred.

"I don't know; I don't think Bonnel Rosecastle is going to keep faith with me."

"In regard to what?"

"Paying me the money."

"What money?"

"Why, you know I was going to keep the secret, and not tell you—"

The speaker stopped short and looked at Fred in a half-startled way.

"Tell me what?" the ex-valet asked, persuasively.

"My tongue has run away with me!" growled Brandt, in his old, natural manner. "Fact is, I've had a rap on the head which would have killed any other man, and it's going to give me a hard pull. I fear brain-fever; my mind wanders at times. Boy, I'll be frank with you! Look out for Bonnel Rosecastle!"

"Why?"

"Because he's not safe while you're around."

"Why not?"

"He robbed you of property—bonds—when

you were an infant. He took them to meet a financial crisis, and they saved him; but he hadn't honor enough to make good the theft when he could. I lately learned of this, and,"—here Brandt's expression became cunning—"have been urging him to right the wrong. I don't think he will do it, so I now tell the secret to you. Don't rely upon him; you must fight for your rights. When you get them, I hope you won't forget me!"

"Can you prove this?"

"The books of the company which issued the bonds, if compared with facts known to you—the date of your father's death, and so forth—will show that the transfer from Ellis to Rosecastle was a forgery."

"Will you go before friends of mine and make this statement?" asked Fred, eagerly.

"Of course. It's a good idea, so lead the way."

There was a certain recklessness about Brandt's manner which betrayed the fact that he was talking more freely than he would have done if his mind was all right, and Fred was not slow to realize that he ought to take advantage of this. He hired a public carriage, and the three were soon on their way to Phineas Hamlin's house.

On the way Fred's courage wavered more than once. Miss Harriet Hamlin had promised aid, but would she give it when the time came?

Arriving there, the ex-valet boldly rung the front door-bell, but his first question to the servant did not bring an encouraging reply—Miss Hamlin was out.

While Fred stood in uncertainty Phineas Hamlin came out of the parlor.

"Can I help you?" he asked, in a friendly way.

"I wanted to see your sister, Miss Hamlin, sir— Can we come in and state the case?" eagerly demanded the boy, breaking off his first speech.

"Certainly! Come in, all of you!"

There was a trace of amusement in the speaker's manner, but he sustained his right to the title of gentleman, and ceremoniously motioned all to be seated. Fred knew that if he could get such a rich and influential man to act as his benefactor it would be a great step, and he poured forth his story rapidly.

Hamlin listened with great gravity.

"This seems almost impossible," he declared. "I have only a speaking acquaintance with Bonnel Rosecastle, but it is hard to realize that one of his position could do such a thing."

"Remember, sir, he was not rich, then."

"And remember," added John Brandt, "that he has lately—or, at least, so I believe—set an assassin upon me. Look here!"

Several times before Fred had noticed that Brandt's buttoned coat bulged peculiarly from his chin down diagonally to the hip on his left side. He now threw his coat open and took out a club of rough and ungainly proportions.

"Look at this!" he reiterated, passing the novel weapon to Hamlin.

The latter received it in surprise, and gazed steadfastly at one side where six perforations were seen in the wood.

"What is this?" he asked, curiously.

"The thing with which Rosecastle's agent tried to kill me!"

"But these holes on the side—"

"Bullet-holes, with the bullets still in them."

"How came they there?"

"I don't know."

"Where did you get this piece of wood?"

Brandt told the story of his adventure on the foot-bridge, and told it in a plain, coherent manner. He added that, while he could in no way explain the mystery of the six bullets, he was positive that the club was the same with which he had been assaulted.

"Mr. Brandt," said Hamlin, "didn't you ever see me before?"

"There is something familiar about your face, but—"

"You saw me at the road-house the very evening you say you were assaulted."

"Bless me! so I did; I remember you now."

"More than that, I am the man who fired those bullets into the rail, and it was the simplest thing in the world; it was only target-shooting. We took that piece of the rail along, but left it in the carriage when we stopped at the road-house, and some one stole it. Why it was used as a weapon to attack you I don't know, unless because of its peculiarly suitable shape."

"Did you see any suspicious person hanging around that night?" Brandt asked, eagerly.

"No. My male companion on that ride, Mr. Montmorency Lestrangle, had a better chance

than I to see if such a prowler was around, for he went outside himself and visited the stable, while my daughter and I remained in the house."

"Perhaps he saw some one."

"That possibility has occurred to me also, and as the reappearance of the fragment of rail, with such a peculiar history attached to it, is so interesting, I will send for Mr. Lestrangle at once, and see what he will say. It was he who preserved the rail after I used it for a target."

Mr. Hamlin dispatched a servant to bring Lestrangle, but sent no explanation; and then, while they waited, questioned Fred further in regard to his claim upon Rosecastle.

"If the claim proves well founded," he remarked, "you will see that my sister will keep her promise to you, and I will not be backward either. I have nothing for or against Rosecastle, but justice has claims no honest man can ignore."

They did not have long to wait for Montmorency Lestrangle. The bell rung, and when Hamlin opened the parlor door, he found the young man in the hall.

"Glad to see you!" the old gentleman observed. "We want you to take part in a bit of an identification. Come in!"

Montmorency entered in his most faultless manner, his eye-glass dangling from a string and hobnobbing with a rose which ornamented his button-hole—he had never looked more like a genuine "dude."

"Mr. Lestrangle, this is John Brandt and some friends of his who wish—"

Hamlin's speech was rudely interrupted. Tip Higgins sprang to his feet, and, pointing to Lestrangle, shrilly cried:

"That's him! That's the man I seen by the Academy of Music, an' he's the captain of the band!"

It was a startling and unexpected interruption, most of all to the new-comer; and he grew strangely white.

"Eh?" demanded Hamlin. "What's that?"

"I say that's the robber captain," Tip repeated.

"What gross insult is this?" inquired Montmorency, trying to bluster.

Both Fred and Brandt also rose.

"That's the captain!" cried Fred.

And Brandt came in as a chorus:

"Yes, that is the man!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CAPTAIN OF THE BAND.

No one was more surprised than those who made the accusation. Fred had seen Lestrangle several times, but rarely heard him speak, and then only a few unimportant words; but, now, he was able to account for the belief before entertained that the voice of the captain of the band was not wholly new. When he heard Lestrangle speak in Hamlin's parlor he quickly recognized the similarity of the voice to that heard in the old building over the pawnshop, and Brandt, with his wits thus quickened, fell into line and added his voice to the others.

Beyond doubt, Montmorency was frightened. "What absurdity is this?" he demanded, faintly.

"Boys, you are away off!" added Hamlin.

"It's true!" asserted Tip. "I seen him, once, plainly."

"And I recognize his voice," corroborated Fred.

"What is all this nonsensical talk about?" persisted Lestrangle.

"Maybe you don't remember the kids under the table when you an' Dan talked over biz in the band's lair," Tip stoutly continued. "You had on a mask then, but I know ye."

"Hamlin, will you allow me to be insulted?" demanded the young man.

"No, no, Lestrangle; there is a mistake here, and you shall not suffer from it. Boys, you are wholly wrong; say no more about this matter."

Hamlin thought that he was right, and he had only the best of intentions in taking this stand. He did not like Montmorency, but, thinking it impossible that such an effeminate-appearing person could be a criminal, he felt called upon to protect one he had invited there.

"Let us speak of the business pertaining to this occasion," he added. "Lestrangle, you will please look at this—"

Hamlin was speaking in a matter-of-fact tone, and had held out the bullet-pierced club carelessly, but he did not complete the sentence.

Montmorency looked, saw the rail, and then dropped into a chair as suddenly as if paralyzed. He was paler than ever.

"What's the trouble?" the host asked, in surprise.

His companion struggled to recover speech. "I—I am not well," he said, tremulously, "I feel faint. am—not very strong, you know." "Let me raise the window. There! the fresh air will revive you. About this piece of wood. Since we saw it, it has figured in an assault case. You will remember that it was stolen from our carriage at the road-house. Well, whoever took it used it to strike down this man, Mr. Brandt, and nearly killed him. Probably it was the work of some tramp. Now, you left the hotel while Miss Hamlin and I waited—"

"I only went to the stable!" interrupted Lestrangle, hastily.

"True. Well, did you see any suspicious-looking person hanging around?"

"No."

"I am sorry, for this piece of rail now has a peculiar history."

Hamlin went on and gave the history in detail. By the time he finished, Montmorency had recovered his calmness fully, and he expressed his ignorance on the subject in quiet and well-chosen words.

"I dare say you do not feel any great interest in this gathering," then remarked Hamlin, smiling, "so we will excuse you. As for the mistaken idea of these boys and Mr. Brandt that you were the robber captain—by the way, a good joke on you, Lestrangle!—we will let it drop without further comment."

He rose to intimate that the interview was at an end, and Lestrangle walked to the door with a firm tread.

Tip and Fred exchanged glances of dismay, for neither wavered in his belief that the captain of the band was before them, but they would not venture to defy Hamlin. John Brandt had fallen into deep thought.

Lestrangle went out, and Hamlin turned briskly to his other callers.

"I have decided to give this case at once to my own lawyer," he resumed. "If the company's books show irregularity in regard to the bonds alleged to have been taken wrongfully by Rosecastle from Captain Ellis, we will soon know the fact. Come with me!"

They went at once, and the lawyer took the case with all the zeal that such men are accustomed to feel in the affairs of a rich client. He promised to do his best, and to lose no time.

When they left the office, Fred again addressed their kind champion.

"Mr. Hamlin, I should be a most ungrateful person to act contrary to your wishes after all you have done for us, but I must ask your leave to say again that Montmorency Lestrangle is the robber captain."

"Fack, b'jinks!" declared Tip.

"Impossible!"

"But I recognized his voice."

"An' I recognized his face!" added Tip.

"My good youths, don't you see how impossible it is? One look at Lestrangle is enough to prove that. He belongs to an abnormal class lacking in backbone, beef and—common sense. He hasn't energy enough for crime. Besides, he is wealthy, or supposed to be."

"I admit he don't look it, but you can't always depend upon appearances."

"True."

"We all feel sure he's the man."

"Far be it from me to stand in the way of justice. If you wish to do so, you can go to Police Headquarters and explain your belief. The officers there will investigate carefully before making any rash move. Now I will leave you, but will write as soon as my lawyer reports. If you have any further business with me, don't hesitate to call."

With these words Mr. Hamlin took his leave and returned to his residence.

"There goes one of the Four Hundred that is every inch a man!" Fred declared.

"But he was way off on Lestrangle," grumbled Tip.

"Gentlemen, what are we going to do about this matter?" asked Fred, gravely.

"He is the captain!"

"So I think."

"I'm sure!"

"Well, shall we go to the police?"

"You bet! Our duty is plain, an' Tip Higgins ain't the man ter want ter see his first detective case go ter smash like this. I've been all torn up the back in the battle, an' now I ought ter hev some salve fer my wounds."

"What do you say, Brandt?"

"Do as you wish," John returned, mechanically.

"Then, down to Police Headquarters we go!"

The following morning one of the city papers had this item among other news of the day:

"The police yesterday raided a thieves' den at No. — street, and made valuable seizures of stolen goods. Since Aaron Nephson & Sons failed in business there, some months ago, a regular band of the light-fingered fraternity have made the place their quarters. Mordecai Josephson, the pawnbroker, acted, too, as 'fence' for those not in the band. Evidently, all things that came to their net were fish, for a little of everything was found. The revelation was due to two shrewd boys, who had learned the secrets of the band. Several arrests were made, and other persons are suspected, but the police withhold all names at present."

While the public at large was reading this item, Fred and Tip were perusing the following letter:

"MY YOUNG FRIENDS:—I have remarkable news for you. After leaving us yesterday, Montmorency Lestrangle went to the Park. Bonnel Rosecastle came along in his carriage and took the former in, but they had gone only a short distance when an accident occurred by which both were fatally injured. Surprising developments followed, for both made confessions of infamy most unexpected to me. Believing that you will understand fully, I will abbreviate their statements as much as possible."

"Rosecastle confessed that he wronged you out of the bonds left by your father—\$20,000 worth—and gave orders to have you paid, with interest. He also confessed that he deceived you to the thieves' quarters, making his son a cat's paw; and that he attempted your life by turning on the gas. He is very anxious to keep these facts from the public, and as he must die, I think it should be done. He has many respectable relatives."

"It seems almost incredible, but frail, womanish, light weight, drawling Lestrangle is the captain of the robbers. Getting in a financial corner, he took that way to keep up his position in society—to get money, I mean. He has nerve which is really amazing, despite his dudish appearance."

"More than this, it was he who robbed my daughter and niece of their jewels. The truth might have been known sooner had not Nettie Reynolds kept back one fact. Unseen by my daughter, Nettie did remove her ear-rings for some trivial cause. She thought she put them back, but, doubtless, did not. The foolish girl liked Lestrangle, and, though she did not think him the robber, would not let it be known that she removed the jewels and let him handle them."

"John Brandt's assailant on the foot-bridge was none other than Lestrangle. When the two met at the road-house Lestrangle recognized Brandt as one of the intruders who had invaded the thieves' den. Believing he was being hunted down, the 'captain' slipped out, took the first weapon he found, which happened to be the broken rail, and assaulted Brandt. He lost the club in the darkness."

"Such are the main facts of the confession. You can get details by coming here later."

"PHINEAS HAMLIN."

Frederick Ellis recovered his long-lost money, with interest, and, abandoning former occupations, will use it in business when he is old enough. He has promised to make Tip his business manager, and Tip has reluctantly abandoned the idea of being a great detective, in order to accept the other position—when the time comes.

Dan, Josephson and the other crooks were duly punished. Bonnel Rosecastle and Montmorency Lestrangle died of their injuries. The former's reputation was guarded, so Percy did not find himself disgraced; but, knowing all the facts, he has been a very humble young man of late.

John Brandt's injury brought on a severe illness, but, recovering at last, he received some money for his aid, though not enough to make him a happy man.

Phineas Hamlin is looking after Fred's and Tip's interests in a general way, and, under his wise oversight, they bid fair to have honorable and useful careers.

THE END.

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